

ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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FINANCIAL AID AND OTHER SELECTED VARIABLES RELATED TO THE
RETENTION OF FIRST-TIME FULL-TIME COLLEGE FRESHMEN AND
THEIR PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION WITHIN SIX YEARS
AT A PRIVATE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE
OR UNIVERSITY

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This mixed methods research study used a QUAN-QUAL Model to examine the impact that various factors have on student persistence to graduation in postsecondary education. A documentary research approach was used to collect secondary or existing data from the student information system for first-time full-time freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years. The size of the sample for the quantitative inquiry was 211. A correlational research design was employed to determine if a significant relationship existed between the dependent variables—*Persistence to Graduation within Six Years (YEAR)* and *Final GPA at Time of Degree Completion (FIN GPA)*—and the independent variables, *Financial Aid Awarded (FINAID)*, *High School*

GPA (HSGPA), ACT Composite Score (ACT COMP), SAT Combined Score (SAT COMB), First-Year First-Semester GPA (FYFS GPA), First-Year Cumulative GPA (FY GPA), Adjusted Gross Income (AGI), and On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing (ON-OFF CAMP). Descriptive statistical analyses were used to describe, summarize, and interpret the data collected.

A case study research approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding into the real-life experiences of a small group of students who did not graduate within six years and who were still persisting toward degree attainment. The Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire was distributed to the participants to gain a holistic understanding of the impact that family, faculty, peers, financial resources, and other environmental influences had on their experiences while persisting toward a college degree. Four questionnaires were completed and returned, followed by three in-depth interviews. The findings from the survey and interviews on the role of financial aid supported the quantitative findings on the relationship between financial aid awarded and persistence to graduation. In the quantitative data analysis, persistence to graduation within six years was significant and positively related to the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. As the number of financial aid occurrences decreased, the number of years to graduate decreased. Alternatively, an increase in the number of financial aid occurrences resulted in an increase in years to graduate. Postsecondary educational leaders and P-12 educational leaders can utilize the study in forming partnerships to foster collaboration and a “move to action” in preparing students to do college-level course work upon graduating from high school.

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FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5: 7)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education researchers have embarked upon a plethora of concepts, models, and theories in an attempt to describe, predict, and explain the phenomenon of student persistence to graduation and student departure from institutions of higher education. There were 17.3 million undergraduate students attending degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States in fall 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). African Americans represented 12% of all students attending four-year public institutions in fall 2014, compared to 61% of whites; 13% attended four-year private nonprofit institutions compared to 66% of whites; and 29% attended private for-profit four-year institutions, compared to 45% of whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).

Student persistence is complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. Approximately 59% of first-time full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution in fall 2007 completed that degree within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Myriad cognitive, socio-psychological, and environmental factors influence persistence in postsecondary education. Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993), in his longitudinal model of student departure, posited that students' personal goal and institutional commitments, as well as external commitments, influence the degree of formal and informal integration into the academic and social systems of the institution;

therefore, the relationship between those commitments influence whether, and in what manner, a student departs from the institution.

Arroyo and Gasman (2014) constructed “an [historically black colleges and universities] HBCU-based educational approach for black college student success” (p. 58). The institution-focused, non-Eurocentric, theoretical framework was heralded to be the first model of its kind (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). In this model, students entered into an accessible and affordable supportive college environment from differing backgrounds and experiences. After entry into the supportive environment, three categories of processes and outcomes occurred: identity formation, values cultivation, and achievement, leading the student to holistic success that included graduation, career attainment, and civic contributions.

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) designed a conceptual framework for student success by creating a path that merges student behaviors and institutional conditions and converges at the intersection of student engagement. Kuh et al. defined student success as, “Academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance” (p. 7).

Whether a theory on college student success is institution centric, student centric, or a mixture of both, the desirable outcome remains the same—student success. It has long been regarded through previous research that academic performance in high school and scores on college entrance examinations are indicators of student persistence in college (Adelman, 2006, Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Financial aid impacts persistence, especially among minority and economically disadvantaged students. St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) found that African Americans “were highly sensitive to finances in their college choices and in their persistence decisions” (p. 564). The ability to pay for college presents a dilemma for this nation. There are entire populations that lag behind in college access and degree attainment. Speaking on the low graduation rates among Maryland’s HBCUs in an article in the *Baltimore Sun*, David Wilson, Ed.D, President of Morgan State University, proclaimed, “Simply stated, lack of financial aid is a huge barrier keeping many of Maryland’s African-American students from completing their degrees within the six-year window used to determine a university’s graduation rate” (para. 4).

A multitude of variables influence student persistence. New concepts are emerging to address the gaps in postsecondary degree attainment among crucial populations of people in the United States. To meet the challenge of the nation’s *2020 Goal* set forth by President Barack Obama in 2009 to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, this country must find or create ways to promote success before college, during college, and after college.

Statement of the Problem

Persistence in higher education is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic phenomenon. Student persistence materializes along a continuum that assumes many forms from freshman year to degree attainment. Approximately 59% of first-time full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution in fall 2007 completed that degree within six years (U.S. Department of

Education, 2015a). College students face myriad academic, financial, and emotional challenges as they persist toward becoming a college graduate. Early identification, along with early, intensive, and continuous intervention increases the chances for student success (Seidman, 2012).

Dismal graduation rates affect institutional selectivity, impact an institution's ability to generate revenue, and more importantly, put the institution in a position of jeopardizing the very mission it promised to uphold. More fundamentally, completing a college degree increases individuals' earnings potential, positively impacts the well-being of their family, increases their chances of health and happiness, and reduces the likelihood that they will live in poverty and depend on public assistance. The degree attainment gap between African Americans and whites broadened from 13 to 18 percentage points during the period from 1990 to 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). In 2014, 22% of African Americans had earned a bachelor's degree compared to 41% of whites and 61% of Asians (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Historically black colleges and universities play a major role in educating individuals, especially African Americans, in closing the degree attainment gap.

Purpose of the Study

Theorists and educational leaders have investigated the phenomenon of student persistence in postsecondary education, in some form, for over eight decades. The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to first examine the relationship between selected variables and persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average for first-time full-time freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort at a private

HBCU. Secondly, to gain an in-depth understanding of the environmental influences that contribute to persistence past six years, the researcher utilized case study research to explore the real-life experiences of a small group of students who began their freshman year at the University more than six years ago and who were still persisting toward a bachelor's degree in spring 2016.

Research Questions

Quantitative Research Questions

- RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded?
- RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school grade point average (GPA)?
- RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and American College Testing (ACT) Composite scores?
- RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) Combined scores?
- RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year first-semester GPA?
- RQ6: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA?

- RQ7: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and parent or independent student adjusted gross income as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?
- RQ8: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours?
- RQ9: Is there a significant relationship between final GPA and the number of years to graduate, total occurrences of financial aid awarded, high school GPA, ACT Composite score, SAT Combined score, first-year first-semester GPA, first-year cumulative GPA, adjusted gross income, and on-campus or off-campus housing?
- RQ10: Is there a significant difference in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within four years than the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within five or six years?
- RQ11: Is there a significant difference in the final GPA and persistence to graduation in Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6?

Qualitative Research Questions

- RQ12: Based on the participants' responses to items on the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire, what factors appear to be contributing to persistence to graduation past six years?

RQ13: Based on the follow-up interviews to the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire, what case themes emerged from the narrative reflections, perspectives, and real-life experiences shared with the researcher by the purposefully selected participants who were still persisting toward graduation after six years?

Significance of the Study

College students encounter myriad challenges academically, financially, socially, and emotionally. Colleges and universities face an overwhelming challenge and excellent opportunity of retaining students from freshman year to degree completion. Theorists continue to hypothesize about why a disproportionate number of college students *drop out, stop out, and transfer out* before earning a degree. Professors are disconcerted at the academic performance and resulting grade point averages of their students at the end of each semester. Student affairs' professionals are relentlessly searching for creative ways to engage and encourage students to "stay the course."

The Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 requires that postsecondary institutions report the percentage of students who complete their program within 150% of the normal time for completion (within six years for students pursuing a bachelor's degree). The significance of this research study is to add to the body of research literature for postsecondary institutions, particularly historically black colleges and universities and minority serving institutions, in addressing the phenomenon of student persistence. This study is also significant to educational leaders in P-12 who serve minority and economically disadvantaged students and their families, especially in under-resourced

school systems. An added value to this institutional study is that the data-driven analyses are guided and supported by the institution's historical evidence instead of a national multi-institutional database. As a strategy to mobilize higher education to increase student success for *Goal 2025*, the Lumina Foundation (2013) listed the following expected outcome: "Higher education systems and institutions adopt data- and evidence-based policies, partnerships, and practices that close attainment gaps for underserved students and improve overall completion rates" (p. 14).

This study is important to educational leaders in P-12 in that it offers a conceptual framework grounded in relevant research that spans over eight decades. The framework identifies factors related to student persistence that increases the chances of a student staying in college until degree completion. The data in this study afford P-12 educational leaders the opportunity to ponder the evidence from empirical studies that show the relationship between persistence in college and personal characteristics, family background, and external influences. This study is instrumental in fostering collaboration between P-12 educational leaders and postsecondary institutions in forming partnerships in preparing students to do college-level course work upon high school graduation; consequently moving toward P-16, and ultimately to P-20 education. The P-20 initiative builds bridges from early childhood education or prekindergarten (P) through high school (12), postsecondary education (16), and on to the workforce (20). Education agencies that have adopted P-16 or P-20 initiatives, such as the University System of Georgia (USG) in the State of Georgia, seek to deliver education in such a way "so that all children graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful

in postsecondary education and the world of work in the 21st century” (USG Website, 2016, para. 1).

The benefits of a student persisting to graduation and earning a college degree within six years are far-reaching. For the individual student, a college degree can provide a sense of personal achievement, increase the chances of higher job satisfaction, enhance family well-being, become a pathway to advanced degrees, improve earnings potential, and reduce the chances of living in poverty. The advantages of student persistence to degree completion extend to higher education institutions in the form of accountability and good stewardship over dwindling resources, increased graduation rates, higher selectivity, and increased institutional effectiveness.

Degree attainment is vital to the nation in developing talent to meet the demands of a global job market, technological advances, and research and innovation. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2012, the United States ranked 12th among 34 OECD member countries in degree attainment in young adults between the ages of 25-34 (OECD, 2014). A college educated society would benefit from more tax revenue, promote greater civic and social engagement, attain higher rates of voter participation and volunteerism, and be less likely to depend on public assistance.

Summary

This chapter introduced the mixed methods research study entitled, “Financial Aid and Other Selected Variables Related to the Retention of First-Time Full-Time College Freshmen and their Persistence to Graduation within Six Years at a Private

Historically Black College or University.” Persistence to graduation is a major concern in colleges and universities. Roughly 59% of first-time full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution in fall 2007 completed that degree within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Student persistence is multifaceted and intricately interwoven with a multitude of personal attributes and external factors.

The purpose of this study was to investigate a selected group of variables and determine if, and to what degree, they were related to persistence to graduation within six years and final grade point average at a private HBCU. Students who eventually obtain a college degree do not always complete their degree within a six-year period. The life experiences of students who do not complete their undergraduate planned program within 150% of the normal time, or six years, are essential in understanding the factors that promote and postpone degree attainment. For that purpose, a small group of students who were still persisting at the private HBCU past six years were invited to participate in a case study to get an in-depth understanding of their journey to becoming a college graduate. The research questions are guided by relevant data found in the research literature on the topic of persistence in postsecondary institutions.

Student persistence in higher education has been explored and investigated for over eighty-five years. The degree attainment gap among African Americans and whites in this country is getting broader. This study is important to educational leaders in P-12 and in the academy in suggesting a theoretical framework based on empirical studies in identifying critical factors that influence persistence to degree completion and a positive college experience.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

Organization of the Review

Colleges and universities face a daunting challenge of retaining and graduating more of the students who enter into their hallowed halls each year. Theorists and educational leaders have studied the phenomenon of student persistence in postsecondary institutions over eight decades; however, the cause and effect of the dismal graduation rates has continued to elude them. This chapter is a review of the literature related to persistence in postsecondary institutions. Concepts, models, and theories are reviewed to conceptualize the relationship of persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average and the variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, *Adjusted Gross Income*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*.

The first American postsecondary institution was established over three centuries ago in 1636 during the Colonial Era. The early collegians of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were largely sons of privileged and devout Puritans who were expected to inherit responsibilities as leaders and men of influence in a new world where their religion was fundamental and not subject to government constraints or to the Church of England (Thelin, 2011). Class sizes were small and retaining students to degree

completion was not the primary goal. Berger, Ramirez, and Lyons (2012) described the early American colleges:

These institutions were not very stable; most did not even stay open long enough to develop a graduating class. It might be said that campus survival needed to be established in most cases before college officials could even begin to worry about issues of student mortality. (p.14)

John N. McNeely

College Student Mortality

Three hundred years later, John N. McNeely would be one of the first pioneers to study why students left college. The study was conducted in 1936-1937 during the Great Depression under the sponsorship of Project in Research in Universities of the Office of Education. In the bulletin entitled, *College Student Mortality*, McNeely (1937) reported findings on 15,535 students from twenty-five public and private universities, including one African-American institution; Howard University. McNeely defined student mortality as “the failure of students to remain in college until graduation” (p. 1). The study was based on the 1931-1932 cohort of first-time college students from fourteen public and eleven private universities seeking an undergraduate degree.

McNeely (1937) further classified student mortality into two distinct groups: gross mortality and net mortality. Gross mortality referred to students who left the universities during or at the end of the 1934-1935 academic year without obtaining a degree. Some students in the gross mortality category transferred to other institutions while others “stopped out” temporarily and returned to the original university at a later

date. Students in this group did not withdraw from higher education entirely and were not considered as leaving the universities. Net mortality was characterized as students who left the universities, did not transfer to another institution, and did not return to their home institution at a later date within the four-year period.

In *College Student Mortality*, McNeely (1937) collected data on 75 potential factors that could affect student mortality; however, he chose to focus on the following:

Sex of student, age at time of entrance, college or school in which registered, proximity of home to college, place of lodging, causes of leaving university, credit hours registered for and earned during each semester or quarter, academic marks made by student, membership in social fraternity or sorority, participating in extracurricular activities, and engagement in part-time work. (p. 3)

Data analysis on student mortality was divided into five sections according to gender, type of institutional control (public or private), geography, size of student body, and size of community. Men made up 71% of students who registered and women represented 29%. Overall, men left college before graduation at a higher rate than women. Additionally, McNeely found that the gross and net student mortality was greater in public institutions than private institutions. The results of the study further disclosed that private institutions had a higher rate of degree attainment and conferred more degrees than public institutions.

While more men registered for the 1931-32 academic year, women persisted to graduation and obtained undergraduate degrees at a greater rate within the four-year period. Accordingly, the study found that a larger percentage of men persisted beyond the four-year period than women. Reinstatement of students who “stopped out” and

returned during the four-year academic period comprised gross student mortality.

McNeely (1937) asserted, “While such students were lost as far as the particular university in which they first registered is concerned, they did not abandon their higher education” (p. 16). Seven institutions submitted subsequent information and McNeely determined that approximately 40.3% graduated in 1935-36, within five years.

McNeely (1937) found that freshmen left college at a much greater rate than upperclassmen. The student mortality rate for freshmen was 33.8%; however, the rate for sophomore, junior, and senior years decreased to 16.7%, 7.7%, and 3.9%, respectively. According to the study, geography affected student mortality. McNeely separated the twenty five institutions into four regions and found that the institutions in the New England and Middle Atlantic States had the lowest gross and net mortality rate. Universities in the Southern States had the highest net mortality rate and the Mountain and Pacific States recorded the highest gross mortality rates within the four regions. The size of the student body did not appear to have a material impact on gross student mortality. According to the data reported, larger universities had the highest gross mortality rate, while degree attainment was highest in institutions that had an enrollment of less than two thousand students. McNeely suggested seven primary causes why students leave college: “(a) dismissal for failure in work, (b) dismissal for disciplinary causes, (c) financial difficulties, (d) death, (e) sickness, (f) needed at home, and (g) lack of interest” (pp. 45-51). McNeely found the two main reasons students left the universities were the failure to achieve satisfactory academic progress and financial difficulties.

McNeely (1937) collected data on potential sociological and environmental factors that had an influence on student mortality. The factors selected were age at time of entrance, location of home, place of lodging, participation in extracurricular activities, and part-time employment (p. 61). He found that a larger percentage of older students left the universities than younger students. Furthermore, the study revealed that the distance from home to school was a factor in students leaving college. Students who came from out of state left the universities at a higher percentage than students who lived in the vicinity of the institution. The student mortality was greater for students living in a rooming house or in a dormitory. Additionally, the percentages were lower for students living at home or in a sorority or fraternity house. McNeely found that approximately 25% of students who left the universities participated in extracurricular activities; therefore, making the assumption that this factor had little or no relationship to student mortality. The majority of the students who left the universities did not engage in part-time work on campus.

According to Morrison and Silverman (2012), McNeely used the term “causal relationship” to understand to what extent the factors affected college student mortality; however, the literature does not indicate he used any statistical methodology to effectively determine causal relationships. The early endeavor by McNeely (1937) to investigate the impact of certain variables on student departure from college helped to set the tone for future researchers to study retention and persistence in higher education.

Alexander W. Astin

Theory of Student Involvement

Alexander W. Astin based his developmental theory on student involvement.

Astin (1984) asserted that “Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p.

528). The student involvement theory had five postulates (Astin, 1984):

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various generalized objects (i.e., first-year seminar) or highly specific objects (i.e., studying for a mathematics test).
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features.
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

Astin (1975) contended that his theory of student involvement could easily be applied to an earlier longitudinal study that he conducted and reported in *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*. In the study, Astin included freshmen entering in fall 1968 from 358 two-year and four-year colleges and universities that participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). Questionnaires were administered to freshmen in fall 1968 and followed up four years later in summer and fall of 1972. A total of 41,356 questionnaires were appropriately completed and used in the study.

Student data collected from the perspective institutions were SAT and ACT scores and whether or not the students had earned a degree by 1972. Astin found that students who participated in extracurricular activities, such as varsity sports, joined sororities or fraternities, were members of honors programs, and participated in study abroad programs; increased their chances of persisting to degree completion. Environmental factors such as the campus environment were key to staying in college as opposed to leaving college. Astin concluded that the findings “support the theory that student persistence to some extent depends on the degree of personal involvement in campus life and environment” (p. 108).

Almost 20 years later, Astin (1993) conducted another longitudinal study by administering a questionnaire to the fall 1985 freshman class from 309 four-year colleges and universities that participated in CIRP. A follow-up to the 1985 questionnaire was sent in the summer and fall of 1989 and the winter of 1990. The total size of sample consisted of 24,847 freshmen who properly completed the follow-up questionnaire. Astin developed the Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model and employed it as a conceptual framework in the study. According to Astin, in the I-E-O Model, *inputs* are described as the characteristics that the student possesses when he or she originally enters the institution; *environment* constitutes the faculty members, academic programs, peer relations, institutional policies, climate, and culture that the student encounters after entering college; and *outcomes* relate to the characteristics and traits that the student develops after being exposed to environmental factors.

Astin (1993) included 146 input variables, 135 institution environmental measures, 57 student environmental measures, and 82 outcome measures in the multi-

institutional, longitudinal study. He found, once again, that learning, academic performance, and retention were positively related to considerable student involvement with the academic environment, faculty, and peer student groups. Student involvement in the academic and social environments of the institution can potentially lead to a commitment to persist.

Vincent Tinto

Longitudinal Model of Dropout from College

Vincent Tinto, a well-known theorist in higher education, particularly in student retention and learning communities; constructed a groundbreaking theory of dropout from college over forty years ago. Inspired by the integration concept of David Emile Durkheim, Tinto (1975), like William C. Spady (1970), based his theoretical model partly on Durkheim's theory of suicide. In the classic, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Durkheim (1951) classified suicide into four categories: altruistic, anomic, fatalistic, and egoistic. Tinto adopted egoistic (referred to by Tinto as "egotistical") suicide as the type to best describe dropout behavior in postsecondary institutions. Tinto (1987, 1993) describes egotistical suicide as "The form of suicide which arises when individuals are unable to become integrated [socially and intellectually] and establish membership within the communities of society" (p. 101).

In his seminal work, *Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research*, Tinto (1975) contended that a college is composed of an academic system and a social system. He posited the following:

The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout (p. 94). Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion. (p. 96)

The student does not come to college as an empty vessel. According to Tinto (1975), he or she comes with individual characteristics, family background, and precollege preparation and experiences that influence commitments to educational goals and commitments to the institution. The integration into the academic and/or social systems of the institution immensely impacts persistence to degree completion or departure.

Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

Tinto's model of dropout from college received considerable attention and criticism from fellow researchers and scholars. Tinto (1982) admitted that the original model did not (a) adequately focus on the role of finances and other external forces in higher education, (b) differentiate between institutional transfer and permanent withdrawal from the higher education system, (c) emphasize dropout behavior in people of different races, gender and socioeconomic status, or (d) address two-year and non-residential colleges. Tinto (1987, 1993) later revised the conceptual framework and

moved away from a model of “dropout” from college toward a model of institutional departure. In the revised model, Tinto (1987, 1993) argued the following:

Individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual’s experience in those systems, as indicated by his or her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration, continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments. (p. 113)

Tinto (1993) proposed that students’ intentions toward personal goal and institutional commitments are shaped by their background, skills and abilities, and precollege education upon entering the institution; those personal goal and institutional commitments, along with external commitments, influence the degree of formal and informal integration into the academic and social systems of the institution; and the relationship between the students’ goals and commitments influence whether, and in what manner, an individual departs from the institution. Tinto proclaimed, “Either reduced goals or weakened goal and/or institutional commitment can lead to institutional departure” (p. 130). Tinto incorporates the external community into college life and experiences to acknowledge the fact that students must contend with external factors outside of academia that might impact their college aspirations.

Furthermore, Tinto (1987, 1993) borrowed the concept of establishing membership into society through the rites of passage from Arnold van Gennep, an anthropologist. The stages of the rites of passage are rites of separation, transition rites,

and rites of incorporation (van Gennep, 1960, cited in Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987, 1993) espoused to the notion that an individual must detach himself or herself, to a degree, from the affiliations of past communities. Often, that entails separating from family, home, local high schools, friends, and peers. Tinto emphasized that students who stay at home may invariably be exposed to external forces that pull them away and impede their incorporation into college life. The next stage in the rites of passage is the transition into the culture and climate whereas the student accepts the customs and patterns of behavior endeared by the institution. The final stage for the student is to incorporate the new values and integrate into the life of the college community. For example, some institutions host a formal ceremony for new students at the culmination of freshman orientation periods to celebrate their induction into the new college family.

Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure has been admired and critiqued by numerous researchers and theorists, alike. As a result, modifications to the model have been suggested by retention and persistence researchers to account for the inadequate representation of the role that finances play in persistence after a student enrolls in college; especially in the interest of students of color and economically disadvantaged students. Tinto (1987, 1993) still maintained that finances mainly impacted initial decisions to attend college and, at best, had a short-term effect on students after starting college caused by their changing financial needs. The concept of separation in the rites of passage from family and community also sparked debate and intellectual discourse (Tierney, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

John P. Bean

Model of Student Attrition

John P. Bean constructed a causal model of student attrition based on an earlier model of voluntary employee turnover developed by James L. Price and past research on attrition. Bean (1980) hypothesized that organizational factors affect satisfaction and consequently, influence departure decisions. The model of student attrition consisted of background variables; organizational factors; intervening variables of satisfaction and institutional commitment; and the dependent variable, “dropout” (Bean, 1980, p. 157). Examples of organizational determinants or factors included institutional grade point averages, goal commitment, membership in campus organizations, practical value of the education, and opportunity to transfer. Bean proposed that background characteristics such as precollege academic performance and socioeconomic status influenced the students’ relationship with the institution after entering college. Instead of the monetary “pay” that employees receive as incentives in work organizations, Bean substituted organizational factors such as grade point averages and institutional quality as “pay” incentives for students in college.

The underlying premise of the model suggested that the degree of satisfaction with the organizational factors either increase or decrease the level of institutional commitment, which in turn, increase or decrease the likelihood that a student would depart from the institution (Bean, 1980). The model of student attrition had similarities to Tinto’s model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1987, 1993). For example, both models were longitudinal in nature and recognized the influence of background characteristics, such as precollege academic performance and socioeconomic status.

Additionally, Bean considered student goal commitment and integration into the institution as organizational factors and determined institutional commitment to be an intervening variable.

Bean (1980) tested the theory by applying multiple regression and path analysis in a study of first-time full-time college freshmen after their first academic year. Bean found that institutional commitment was the main indicator of departure for female and male students. Bean contributed a certain amount of success to the model in analyzing the longitudinal process of student attrition; nonetheless, he admitted that the model did not account for 80% of the variance in dropout for females and 90% for males.

Financial Aid and Persistence

Financing higher education in America has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon over the last three decades. Colleges and universities are relying more than ever before on revenue from tuition and fees to remain viable and sustainable. Empirical studies have shown and research literature has validated, in varying degrees, that financial aid has a plausible relationship to student persistence in college. The availability of financial aid has done wonders in leveling the playing field in facilitating more college aspirants in accessing higher education; however, more focus is needed in determining how, and to what degree, financial aid impacts persistence to graduation.

DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) conducted a study by using estimates from a hazard model of college student departure. DesJardins et al. performed simulations by changing the amount and type of financial aid that students received over time to determine how the changes affected the students' persistence decisions. Tinto

(1987, 1993) considered financial aid to be significant primarily when making decisions to attend college. Tinto's position on financial aid did not adequately address all college students, especially minority and economically disadvantaged students. DesJardins et al (2002) contended:

Most studies that examine the effects of aid on student persistence/departure decisions focus on short time frames (that is, the first year or two of college), they often fail to distinguish how different types of aid affect student decision-making, and very few of these studies examine how the effects of aid may change over time. (p. 654)

DesJardins et al. (2002) directed the empirical study at a large public land grant university in fall 1986 where a sample of 3,975 students were observed post hoc for three terms each year for over seven years. The dependent variable was the first stopout which was defined as the "first occurrence of noncontinuous enrollment" (p. 657). The types of aid offered were loans, grants, scholarships, work study, student on-campus employment (not need-based), and a state grant program. The data collected confirmed that of the 3,975 students, 69% (N = 2,723) had a first stopout and of the first stopouts, 52% (N = 1,416) did not return to the institution within the seven-year window. Furthermore, of the 48% of first stopouts who did re-enroll, 71% had a second stopout. Additionally, of the 1,528 students who graduated, 79% never stopped out during the seven-year window. Moreover, only 61 students who stopped out two or more times finally graduated. DesJardins et al. postulated that "students who stop out are very unlikely to graduate" (pp. 657-658).

The data analysis from the simulations suggested that all forms of financial aid, except grants, decreased the chances of stopping out (DesJardins et al., 2002). Scholarships had the greatest impact on retention each year, followed by work study having a significant impact in the first two years of college. Consequently, financial aid packages reduced the occurrence of stopouts over time compared to not providing financial aid at all. It was also found that not all forms of financial aid had the same effect and the impact of a specific form of financial aid could change over time. Loans had a small effect on reducing stopout. By converting loans to scholarships, similar to Princeton University, the median time to dropout was increased by 25% and persistence rates increased by 10% in Year 3 and Year 4. According to the Princeton University's Website (2015), in 2001, it became the first university to offer all financial aid recipients a financial aid package that replaced loans with grant aid. The study also suggested that frontloading financial aid increased persistence, especially in Year 2 and Year 3. When an institution frontload financial aid, it normally means that the scholarships and/or grants will be offered only in the first two years of matriculation instead of being offered each year.

St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) employed the financial-nexus model to conduct a study to assess the effects of student financial aid on college choice and persistence by African Americans and whites. Sequential logistic regression analyses were utilized on the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1987 (NPSAS-87) dataset for the study. St. John et al. (2005) explained, "The nexus model examines how student background, finance-related reasons for choosing a college, college experience, current aspirations, prices and subsidies, and living costs influence persistence" (p. 550).

St. John et al. (2005) revealed that a larger percentage of African-American students were female, mothers of African-American students did not have a college degree, were financially independent, were from lower income families, had lower grades, and had a desire to obtain a master's degree. Alternatively, a larger percentage of whites had mothers and fathers who had obtained master's degrees, had completed high school, were from upper-income families, and received B grades.

St. John et al. (2005) established that African Americans whose parents had some college were at least 5% less likely to persist to degree completion. Furthermore, at least 5% of African Americans were more likely to persist if they chose to attend college based on financial aid offers. Additionally, the study indicated that attending college full-time had a negative impact on persistence among African Americans; however, grades had a positively significant relationship to persistence. Moreover, the analysis revealed that African Americans chose which colleges to attend based on financial aid packages and low tuition costs and subsequently, had higher grant and loan amounts. Each \$1,000 increase in tuition and living costs decreased the probability of persistence by 12% and 4.5%, respectively. Overall, African Americans "Were highly sensitive to finances in their college choices and in their persistence decisions" (p. 564). Among African Americans in the study, 18% were from upper-income families and had parents with at least a college degree. Consequently, over 25% of African Americans in the upper-income group did not consider low tuition or financial aid extremely important in choosing a college.

In an effort to explore the direct and indirect influences of finances on persistence, Cabrera, Nora, and Casteneda (1992) conducted an empirical study based on a full

structural causal model that merged specific features from several notable theoretical frameworks. Cabrera et al. (1992) incorporated variables from the student integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1987), the student attrition model (Bean, 1985; Bean, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985 as cited in Cabrera et al., 1992), the ability to pay model (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990 as cited in Cabrera et al., 1992), Nora's model that addressed the role of encouragement from significant others on persistence (Nora, 1987 as cited in Cabrera et al., 1992), findings on large urban commuter institutions (Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983 as cited in Cabrera et al., 1992), and research on financial aid (Voohrees, 1985). Like Tinto's model of institutional departure (also referred to as student integration model), this model posited that as the student immersed himself or herself into the academic and social fabric of the institution; the commitments to personal educational goals and to the institution would be increased. As a result, Cabrera et al. (1992) established the following: "These commitments are believed to affect their intent to persist" (p. 575).

The longitudinal study comprised freshmen students in the fall 1988 class at a large commuter urban institution. In spring 1989, questionnaires were mailed to 2,453 first-time full-time freshmen; of these, 466 were properly completed and used in the study. College transcripts and financial aid records were obtained to determine spring 1989 grade point average and financial aid awarded. Cabrera et al. (1992) found that, for academic integration, finance attitudes (satisfaction with financial support), encouragement from significant others, and high school performance had a significant direct effect on academic and intellectual development, while encouragement from significant others, high school performance, and financial aid significantly affected grade

point average. The social integration test revealed that financial aid and encouragement from significant others had significant direct effects on student socialization.

Furthermore, encouragement from significant others and social integration showed a direct effect on institutional commitment. Additionally, the analysis disclosed that commitment to the institution, commitment to complete a college degree, and financial aid had a direct effect on intent to persist. Lastly, Cabrera et al. (1992) found that college academic performance and intent to persist had a direct effect on the student's persistence decisions. It was found that all independent variables had a significant total effect on persistence decisions; however, intent to persist (0.599) had the greatest total effect on persistence, followed by cumulative GPA (0.271) and financial aid (0.268).

High School GPA and Persistence

The path to college success and degree attainment begins long before the first day of class. Rigorous high school courses in English (language arts), mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages, and the arts are precursors to college academic achievement. In *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015-African American Students* (2016), ACT and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) recommended the following high school courses as part of the core curriculum:

- Four years of English;
- Three years of mathematics, including rigorous courses in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II;
- Three years of science, including rigorous courses in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics;

- Three years of social studies. (p. 18)

Tinto (1975) considered high school GPA and standardized tests as indicators of college academic performance and thereby included precollege schooling in his model of student departure. Tinto (1975) further postulated:

Of the two, past grade performance tends to be the better predictor of success in college if only because it corresponds more closely to the individual's ability to achieve within an educational setting with social and academic requirements not too different from that of the college. (p. 101)

Atkinson and Geiser (2009) agreed that high school grades are the best predictors of student readiness to do college-level work and asserted that, "Irrespective of the quality or type of school attended, cumulative grade point average in academic subjects in high school has proved to be the best overall predictor of student performance in college" (p. 665).

Astin and Oseguera (2005) of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) conducted a national study on degree attainment using data on college entrants from the 1994 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. The study was based on degree completion data provided six years later in fall 2000 for 56,818 first-time full-time students from 262 four-year nonprofit colleges and universities. The study found that academic preparation was a compelling factor in four-year and six-year degree completion rates. The results of the study showed that 39.4% completed their degree within four years and 58.8% within six years.

Students who earned an A or A+ grade point average in high school had four- and six-year completion rates of 58.2% and 77.5%, respectively. The four-year completion rate for those who had a high school grade point average of C was 8% and 20% for six-year degree completion. Comparably, students who scored at least 1300 on the SAT, the four-year degree completion rate was 62.3% and the six-year degree completion rate was 76.5%. Students whose combined SAT score was less than 800 completed at a rate of 18.2% within four years and 39.8% within six years (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

The researchers at HERI noted the largest difference existed when high school grades were combined with SAT scores. The analyses revealed that students with high school grade point averages of A and scores of 1300 and above, had a four-year degree completion rate of 68.9%, and a six-year completion rate of 82.6%. The four-year and six-year degree completion rates for students with a C grade point average and scored below 800 were 7.8% and 20.4%, respectively.

College Entrance Examinations and Persistence

The ACT (originally American College Testing Program) and SAT (originally Scholastic Aptitude Test and Scholastic Assessment Test) are the two primary entrance tests used as part of the admissions' process in colleges and universities. American higher education has a long history with standardized tests that dates back to the College Board examinations in 1901 (Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). The first SAT was administered in 1926 and the ACT was founded in 1959 (Zwick, 2004). According to Deng and Kobrin (2007), the SAT Reasoning Test “measures developed verbal and mathematical reasoning abilities related to successful performance in college” (p. 1).

Currently, the SAT examination includes four components: critical reading, writing, mathematics, and essay. As of March 2016, the format changed to two components with an optional essay.

The ACT focuses on instructional objectives that are taught in high school (Zwick, 2004). The content areas of ACT are English, mathematics, reading, science, and an optional essay. According to *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015-African American Students* (2016) report, a disturbing gap continues to exist between African Americans who meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks compared to their white and Asian peers. ACT classifies benchmark subjects as English, reading, mathematics, and science. In 2015, 12% of African Americans met three or more benchmarks compared to 50% whites and 59% Asians. The report showed a similar trend for the prior five years.

Undergraduate college entrance examinations remain a subject of debate and argument, especially as it relates to minorities and African Americans in particular. In an article in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Toldson and McGee (2014) asserted the following:

Black students' scores on the SAT and ACT have been relatively flat for the last 20 years, although significant gains have been made in Black students' graduation rates and college-degree attainment. The disparity in those numbers raises questions about the significance of the SAT in predicting long-term college success for African Americans-or any student, for that matter. (p. 1)

Opponents contend that standardized tests are biased and unreliable and, like Toldson and McGee, ACT and SAT examinations are not significant in predicting success in college, particularly among African Americans.

First-Semester GPA and Persistence

Academic performance in college is a key indicator that measures, quantitatively, the degree to which an individual demonstrates the mastery of his or her course work and progresses academically. The first-semester grade point average for first-time undergraduate students provide a tangible representation of time and effort dedicated to study and participation in educationally purposeful activities. Hosch (2008) asserted that “Grade point averages encompass a wide range of factors such as preparation, effort, commitment, emotional adjustment and integration, financial stability...” (p. 2). Grade point averages impact the students’ time-to-degree and the institution’s retention and graduation rates.

Hosch (2008) conducted a study that included 315 member-institutions of the Consortium for the Study of Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE). The data for the study included fall 2000 first-time full-time freshmen students who earned a first-semester GPA below 2.0. The overarching finding from the study revealed that the first-semester grade point averages of first-time full-time freshmen were “predictive of subsequent retention and graduation from the institution” (p. 2). Furthermore, the study revealed a statistically significantly inverse relationship between the institution and proportion of students who earned below a 2.0 GPA. For example, out of the 56 institutions that reported that no more than 10% of their first-time full-time students earned a GPA below

2.0 during the first semester, the mean one-year retention rate was 82% and the mean graduation rate was 65%.

Those findings indicated that the lower the number of students who earned a GPA under 2.0, the higher the one-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates were for the institutions. On the other hand, among the 22 institutions that reported at least 31% of their first-time full-time students earning below a 2.0 GPA, the mean one-year retention and mean six-year graduation rate was 65% and 33%, respectively. Contrarily, the higher the number of students who earned a GPA below 2.0 in their first semester; the lower the retention and graduation rates were for the institutions (Hosch, 2008).

Hosch (2008) further examined the association between first-semester GPA and retention and graduation rates by conducting an institutional case study at a mid-size public comprehensive university that boasted a fall 2007 enrollment of 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The study included a longitudinal dataset of 3,876 first-time full-time freshmen who entered in fall 1999, fall 2000, and fall 2001. The datasets comprised demographic attributes, high school rank, SAT scores, semester GPA, and attempted credit hours. The mean SAT score was 973 for the three years with 16% in the top quartile of their graduating high school class and 32% in the second quartile. The results showed that 28% earned a first-semester GPA between 3.00-4.00, 43% earned between 2.00-2.99, and 28% earned below a 2.0 GPA.

Hosch's (2008) most compelling finding was that first-semester GPA was the student characteristic most related to graduation within six years; even more so than gender, race, or ethnicity. The average six-year graduation rate of first-time full-time students who earned a first-semester GPA of 3.0 or higher was 63%, 20 percentage points

above the institutional average. Alternatively, for students who earned a first-semester GPA below 2.0 or withdrew from the university, the six-year graduation rate was 9%, a startling 22 percentage points below the institutional average (Hosch, 2008).

Gershenfeld, Hood, and Zhan (2016) discovered an “at-risk zone” while conducting a study of the impact of first-semester grade point averages on degree completion among minority and economically disadvantaged freshmen students at a public, highly selective, flagship university in the Midwest. The study sample included 1,947 students from the 2005 and 2006 freshmen class who also participated in one or more of three institutional programs designed to increase access and promote success of underrepresented students. The programs were referred to as need-based programs (NBP) which covered all educational expenses; merit program (MP) which issued annual \$1,000 scholarships based on an ACT Composite score of 23 or above and \$3,000 annually if students were eligible for the Pell Grant; and services (S) that mainly targeted students who came from under-resourced school districts in the surrounding counties.

The dependent variable was whether or not a student graduated within six years and independent variables included race, gender, ACT Composite score, and programs (NBP/MP/S), first-semester GPA, academic college, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), and non-STEM at time of enrollment. Gershenfeld et al. (2016) found that Pacific Islanders and white students made up the majority of NBP students; the largest group of students in program S was African American; Hispanics made up most of the MP group of students; and the mean first-semester GPA ranged from 2.35 for students in the S program to 2.87 for students in both NBP and MP programs. Moreover, S program students posted the second highest four-year graduation

rates among the combination of programs, in spite of having the lowest ACT Composite scores (Gershenfeld et al., 2016).

It was also noted that the minority students (93%) in this study graduated at higher rates than the white students. The regression models indicated that students in the merit program and services program were less likely to graduate than students who were in the merit program only; the first-semester GPA was a better predictor of graduation than precollege factors such as race, gender, and ACT Composite score; and, compared to students who earned a first-semester GPA of 3.68-4.00, students earning a first-semester GPA of 2.33 or lower were significantly at a higher risk of not graduating. Gershenfeld et al. (2016) concluded that grade point averages between 2.00 and 2.33, which is above the probationary status of 2.00, “can be identified as the at-risk zone” (p. 482).

Summary

This chapter presented the review of research literature that laid the foundation to establish a theoretical framework with variables that are relevant in examining the persistence phenomenon in this study. There is an extensive history of research in student departure from postsecondary education that spans over 85 years. A plethora of models, concepts, and theories have been tested in search of causal relationships between student persistence and factors such as student background characteristics, academic performance, social interactions, and external commitments. Student departure from college got the attention of the federal government in the early 1930s and prompted a study under the sponsorship of the Office of Education. John McNeely conducted the study in 1936-1937 to determine the factors that influenced students to leave college

before graduating. McNeely found the two main reasons why students left college were the failure to achieve satisfactory academic progress and financial difficulties.

Thirty years later, Vincent Tinto (1975) penned a seminal work that would cause a paradigm shift in the way researchers approached persistence and retention in higher education. In *Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research*, Tinto developed a longitudinal model of dropout from college based on the integration concept of David Emile Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide. Tinto posited that decisions to leave college are based on the extent to which a student becomes integrated into the academic and social systems of the institution. Tinto (1975) further claimed that the more a student interacts and becomes academically and socially integrated into the institution, the more likely the student will persist to his or her academic goals. Tinto (1987) later moved toward a theory of institutional departure and expanded the model to consider the effects of external influences on persistence in the life of the college student. The model of institutional departure was based on Arnold van Gennep's (1960, cited in Tinto, 1987) rites of passage. The three stages of the rites of passage are rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation.

Alexander W. Astin conducted longitudinal, multi-institutional studies and found that student involvement with the academic environment, faculty, and peer groups have a positive effect on persistence. Astin (1975) described student involvement as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). Astin (1993) developed the Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model and applied the concept in longitudinal studies. Astin (1993) described the elements of I-E-O:

Inputs are the characteristics that the student possesses when he or she originally enters the institution; *environment* constitutes the faculty members, academic programs, peer relations, institutional policies, climate, and culture that the student encounters after entering college; and *outcomes* relate to the characteristics and traits that the student develops after being exposed to aspects of the environment. (p. 7)

John P. Bean viewed student departure from higher education through the lens of employee turnover in work organizations. Bean (1980) developed a model of student attrition and posited that organizational determinants such as institutional grade point averages and membership in campus organizations affect satisfaction and, in turn, influence departure decisions. Bean substituted the monetary “pay” incentives in work organizations with organizational factors such as grade point averages and institutional quality in his model of student attrition. Bean conducted a study of first-time full-time students after their first year of college and found that institutional commitment was the main indicator of student departure.

Financial aid has an impact on student persistence. DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) conducted a study and found that all forms of financial aid, except grants, decreased the likelihood that a student would leave college. Additionally, the study revealed that not all forms of financial aid had the same effect and the impact of a specific form of financial aid could change over time. St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) conducted a study utilizing the financial-nexus model to assess the effects of financial aid on college choice and persistence. The study found that African Americans chose colleges based on financial aid packages and low tuition costs; and subsequently,

had higher grant and loan amounts. St. John et al. (2005) concluded that African Americans “Were highly sensitive to finances in their college choices and in their persistence decisions” (p. 564).

Perhaps the most common agreed upon indicator of persistence among postsecondary retention and persistence researchers is academic performance. High school grade point averages and grade point averages after entering college are significantly related to persistence to degree completion. ACT and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) recommend a rigorous high school curriculum for college aspirants that include four years of English, three years of rigorous courses in mathematics, three years of science, and three years of social studies, especially for African-American students to ensure they are better prepared to do college-level course work.

Research studies have shown that college entrance examinations, ACT and SAT, are also related to persistence. Standardized tests have sparked debate in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Opponents contend that standardized tests are biased and unreliable and, in the case of ACT and SAT examinations; are not significant in predicting success in college, particularly among African Americans.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kurt Lewin once stated, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). The researcher constructed a theoretical framework based on the review of research literature to examine persistence to graduation within six years. Postsecondary institutions that are eligible to receive Title IV funds are required to disclose graduation rates for bachelor’s degree-seeking students who complete their programs of study within 150% of the normal time, or six years. Persistence in higher education is important for all constituents, especially the student. The theoretical framework merges concepts from several disciplines and philosophical ideologies.

Theory of Variables

There are many factors that influence persistence to degree attainment in postsecondary education. In a review of the literature, the factors related to student persistence included college readiness such as high school grade point average and scores from college entrance examinations. High school grade point averages and college entrance examinations have long been regarded as strong indicators of success and persistence in college (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009; Deng & Korbrin, 2007). After entry into college, especially during the first critical year, the first-semester and the first-year cumulative grade point averages are critical. Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) asserted that

precollege preparation and academic integration into the academic system of the institution impact persistence.

Financial aid has been found to impact persistence, especially among minority and economically disadvantaged students. Tinto (1987, 1993) later added financial resources to his model of institutional departure. St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) found that financial aid was a factor among African-American students' decision to persist. Moreover, DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) contended that financial aid not only influenced an individual's decision to attend college; but, the types of financial aid while in college had an effect on persistence to degree completion, as well.

The effects of a family's socioeconomic status, including income, have a long history in this country and have been found to have a direct effect on college access and college success. Over the years, numerous researchers have included family background and socioeconomic status as factors in their concepts, models, and theories on educational attainment (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980). The researcher incorporated the parent and independent student adjusted gross income, as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), as a part of the theoretical framework. On-campus living allows a college student to become more academically and socially integrated into the fabric of the college community. Students living on campus are more likely to be involved by participating in campus organizations, fraternities and sororities, intercollegiate sports, student leadership positions, and other educationally purposeful activities. Student involvement and engagement have been found to influence persistence in college (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980).

Definition of Variables

ACT Composite Score. The ACT, formerly American College Testing, is a college readiness assessment examination that some colleges and universities use in making admissions' decisions. The ACT examination consists of English, mathematics, reading, and science; the writing test is optional. The composite score is the average of the four test scores earned during a single test.

Alternative/Private Loans. Alternative or private loans are loans from private lenders that are available to undergraduate and graduate students. The loans must be repaid.

Federal Parent PLUS Loans. Federal Parent PLUS loans are federal student aid available to parents of dependent undergraduate students who have enrolled at least half-time. Financial need is not required for eligibility. Qualifying applicants must not have an adverse credit history. The loans must be repaid. Parent PLUS loans cannot be transferred to the student and do not become the student's responsibility to repay.

Federal Pell Grants. Federal Pell grants are federal grants awarded to undergraduate students who have financial need and have not completed a bachelor's or graduate degree. The Federal Pell grant does not have to be repaid.

Federal Perkins Loan. Federal Perkins loans are student aid available for undergraduate and graduate students who are enrolled at least part-time. Students must demonstrate financial need. The loans must be repaid.

Federal Stafford Loans (Subsidized). Federal Subsidized Stafford loans are low interest loans available to undergraduate students who are enrolled at least half-time. Students must demonstrate financial need. The loans must be repaid.

Federal Stafford Loans (Unsubsidized). Federal Unsubsidized Stafford loans are low interest loans available to undergraduate and graduate students who are enrolled at least half-time. Financial need is not required for eligibility. The loans must be repaid.

Federal Work Study. Federal work study is part-time employment for undergraduate and graduate students with financial need that allows them to earn money to help pay for educational expenses.

Final GPA. The final GPA is the grade point average recorded in the term that the undergraduate degree was awarded.

Financial Aid Awarded. Financial aid awarded denotes the grants, loans, scholarships, and work study offered, accepted, and disbursed to first-time full-time college freshmen who enrolled in fall 2008.

First-Year Cumulative GPA. First-year cumulative GPA is the grade point average recorded at the end of the spring 2009 semester, the first year. The grade point average was calculated based on a 4.0 scale.

First-Year First-Semester GPA. First-year, first-semester GPA is the grade point average recorded at the end of fall 2008, the first semester. The grade point average was calculated based on a 4.0 scale.

Graduation within Six Years. Graduation within six years represents students in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years of their freshman, by summer 2014.

High School GPA. High school GPA is the grade point average, based on a 4.0 scale, earned by a student upon completion of a high school diploma.

Independent Student Adjusted Gross Income. In this research study, independent student AGI is the adjusted gross income of the independent student

indicated on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form (FAFSA) that an individual must file to receive federal student aid.

Merit-Based Scholarships. Merit-based scholarships are student aid, generally in the form of scholarships, based on academic or other achievements such as artistic and athletic achievements and abilities.

No Financial Aid Awarded. In this research study, no financial aid awarded refers to students who did not receive a financial aid award during a specific term.

Off-Campus Housing. Off-campus housing represents the residence of the student while matriculating at the University. Off-campus housing includes living at home, with relatives, or with friends.

On-Campus Housing. On-campus housing represents the residence of the student while matriculating at the University. On-campus housing refers to the residence halls owned by the University located on the main campus.

Parent Adjusted Gross Income. In this research study, parent adjusted gross income is the adjusted gross income (AGI) of the parent indicated on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form (FAFSA) that an individual must file to receive federal student aid.

SAT Combined Score. The SAT, formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test and Scholastic Assessment Test, is a college readiness assessment examination that some colleges and universities use in making admissions' decisions. The SAT examination currently includes critical reading, writing, mathematics, and essay. The combined score is the total verbal and mathematics scores earned during a single test.

State Grants. State grants are financial aid from a student's state of legal residence. Awards may be based on financial need, past academic performance, service to the community or special areas of study.

Definition of Other Terms

Attrition. Attrition refers to a student who fails to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012).

Dropout. Dropout refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete a degree (i.e., bachelor's degree), but did not (Berger et al., 2012).

Ex Post Facto. Ex post facto is defined as "after the fact," meaning the situation cannot be manipulated because the change has already occurred.

Financial Need. Financial need is defined as the difference between the cost of attendance (COA) at an institution and the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) as calculated from information reported on the FAFSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

Graduation Rate. Graduation rate is the rate required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes under the Student Right-to-Know Act. The rate is calculated as the percentage of students who complete their program within 150% of the normal time for completion, within six years for students pursuing a bachelor's degree and within three years for associate's degrees (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines an HBCU as any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black

Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association.

Independent Student. For the purposes of federal student aid, an independent student is one of the following: At least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor, or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

Mortality. Mortality is defined as the failure of a student to remain in college until degree completion (Berger et al., 2012).

Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Colleges and universities serving a large percentage of minority students.

Persistence. Persistence defined as the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from freshman year through degree completion (Berger et al., 2012).

Postsecondary Education. Postsecondary education refers to the provision of formal instructional programs with a curriculum designed primarily for students who have completed the requirements for a high school diploma or equivalent. This includes programs of an academic, vocational, and continuing professional education purpose, and excludes avocational and adult basic education programs (NCES, 2015).

Retention. Retention refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission into the institution through degree completion (Berger et al., 2012).

Retention Rate. For four-year institutions, retention rate is the percentage of first-time bachelors' (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall

who are again enrolled in the current fall (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2015).

Stopout. Stopout refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from college (Berger et. al, 2012). The student may return to the same institution or another institution in the system of higher education at a later date.

Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990. The Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 requires that postsecondary institutions receiving Federal Student Aid report the percentage of students who complete their program within 150% of the normal time for completion (within six years for students pursuing a bachelor's degree and within three years for associate's degrees).

Relationship among Variables

First-time full-time freshmen endure myriad factors that have a direct impact on their college experiences which can greatly influence academic success and persistence to degree completion within six years and the final grade point average. As a result of the literature review, the researcher determined that the independent variables in Figure 1 warranted an investigation into whether, and to what extent, they were related to dependent variables, *Persistence to Graduation within Six Years (YEAR)* and *Final GPA (FIN GPA)*, in the Fall 2008 Cohort at the University.

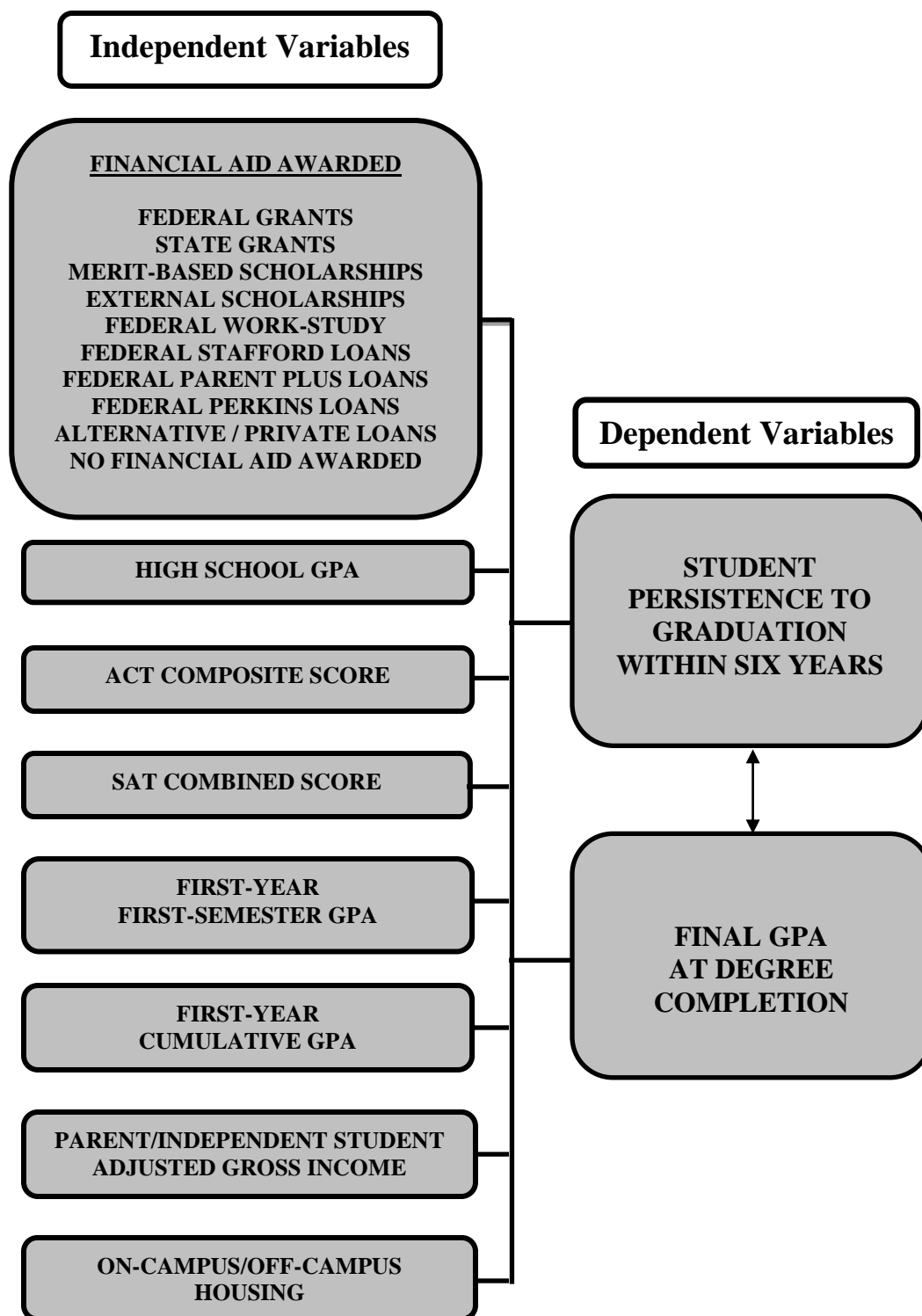


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study.

The independent variables are: *Financial Aid Awarded (FINAID)*, *High School GPA (HSGPA)*, *ACT Composite Score (ACT COMP)*, *SAT Combined Score (SAT COMB)*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA (FYFS GPA)*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA (FY GPA)*, *Adjusted Gross Income (AGI)*, *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing (ON-OFF CAMP)*.

Research Questions

Quantitative Research Questions

- RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded?
- RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school grade point average (GPA)?
- RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and American College Testing (ACT) Composite scores?
- RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) Combined scores?
- RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year first-semester GPA?
- RQ6: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA?
- RQ7: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and parent or independent student adjusted gross income as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?

- RQ8: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours?
- RQ9: Is there a significant relationship between final GPA and the number of years to graduate, total occurrences of financial aid awarded, high school GPA, ACT Composite score, SAT Combined score, first-year first-semester GPA, first-year cumulative GPA, adjusted gross income, and on-campus or off-campus housing?
- RQ10: Is there a significant difference in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within four years than the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within five or six years?
- RQ11: Is there a significant difference in the final GPA and persistence to graduation in Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6?

Qualitative Research Questions

- RQ12: Based on the participants' responses to items on the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire, what factors appear to be contributing to persistence to graduation past six years?
- RQ13: Based on the follow-up interviews to the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire, what case themes emerged from the narrative reflections, perspectives, and real-life experiences shared

with the researcher by the purposefully selected participants who were still persisting toward graduation after six years?

Limitations of the Study

This section discusses the limitations of the study. The study was conducted at one institution, a private HBCU, located in a metropolitan city in the southeastern part of the United States. The data for the study were collected for one freshman class that began in the fall of 2008. The Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 required all postsecondary institutions that received Title IV funds to report graduation rates and the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 required those colleges and universities to report the data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). IPEDS' calculation of graduation rates is based on fall enrollment for first-time, full-time students (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). The calculation does not include transfer students or students who enroll in the winter/spring semester at baccalaureate institutions. Consequently, only first-time full-time students who were admitted and enrolled for fall 2008 were included in this study. The majority of the participants was African American and consisted of 70% female and 30% male. Four participants completed the survey that was administered to students who were still persisting past six years as part of the qualitative inquiry. Finally, the researcher is a staff member at the site of the study and has access to student data.

Summary

Persistence in postsecondary education is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic phenomenon. Each student is unique and comes to college with individual attributes,

aspirations, and life experiences. The theoretical framework is based on past and current research literature and was applied to the quantitative sample in this study to determine whether, and to what extent, the independent variables were related to persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average at the time of degree completion. The quantitative research questions that guided the study examined the relationship between the dependent variables and *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, *Adjusted Gross Income*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. External influences are embedded in the real-life experiences of a college student. Perceptions of family support, role of financial resources, engagement in campus activities, and the importance of peer relations are not quantifiable in the same sense as grade point averages or SAT scores; however, those factors can play a vital role in persistence. The qualitative research questions in this study explored the impact of those environmental factors on persistence in degree attainment.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Low graduation rates in postsecondary education have caused major concerns in most colleges and universities. Students leaving college before they graduate has a ripple effect that flows from the individual student to the nation, at large. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the selected variables contributed to persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average. Furthermore, the researcher explored the real-life experiences of a small group of students who did not graduate within six years and who were still persisting toward earning a college degree. The data used in the study are secondary or existing data retrieved from the student information system. This chapter describes the research design employed to conduct a nonexperimental study, instrumentation used, sampling and data collection procedures followed, a description of the study site and participants, and the statistical and data analyses performed.

Research Design

The QUAN-QUAL Model was used in this mixed methods research study to investigate the relationship between selected variables and persistence to graduation for first-time full-time freshmen within six years and the final grade point average. Furthermore, the researcher sought to get an in-depth understanding of the real-life

experiences of a small group of students who began as freshmen at the University more than six years ago and who were still persisting toward an undergraduate degree. The QUAN-QUAL Model, also referred to as the triangulation mixed methods design, combines quantitative and qualitative data in the same research study. The QUAN-QUAL Model permits the researcher to collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and weigh the data equally (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). The objective of triangulation is to corroborate and join the results of different research methods while studying the same phenomenon in a single inquiry (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The quantitative part of the study concentrated on whether, and to what extent, a relationship existed between persistence to graduation and final grade point average, and the selected variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, *Adjusted Gross Income*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. A correlational research design was utilized to examine the relationship between the quantitative dependent and independent variables (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Descriptive statistics was applied to describe, analyze, and summarize the data. The data for this study were secondary or existing data collected from the institution's student information system. The data collected included demographics, enrollment status, financial aid records, high school transcripts, college entrance examination scores, grade point averages, campus housing records, and graduation dates.

Additionally, to get a holistic understanding of how other external factors impact persistence, a qualitative inquiry was conducted into the lives of a small group of purposefully selected students who were still persisting at the University toward an

undergraduate degree past six years. Creswell's (2013) comprehensive definition of qualitative research states:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

A case study research approach was used to conduct the qualitative part of the inquiry. According to Creswell (2013) case study research is a qualitative approach in which the researcher "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection" (p. 97).

The researcher and a committee member developed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire to gain a holistic understanding of the impact that family, faculty, peers, and environmental influences had on student experiences while persisting toward a college degree (see Appendix A). A questionnaire was used in the qualitative component of the study as a data collection instrument. The GSOUP instrument is a mixed questionnaire in that it employs a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended items (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The researcher administered the

questionnaire to collect responses and feedback to assist in constructing the follow-up interview protocol. Researchers use questionnaires in qualitative research and, based on the participants' responses, conduct follow-up interviews to gather more information (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

Johnson and Christensen (2008) agreed that questionnaires are not limited to any one research method, but can be used to collect data in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research studies. Furthermore, Johnson and Christensen asserted that case study research methodologists advocate that researchers should “rely on any data that will help you understand your case and answer your research questions” (p. 409). The qualitative data were composed of responses from GSOP and a structured closed and open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix B). Follow-up interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected group of respondents who completed the survey and/or met the criteria.

Description of the Setting

The site for this study was a private, coeducational, residential, and comprehensive research HBCU in the southeastern part of the United States. The fall 2014 enrollment was approximately 3,500. The institution offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in Arts and Sciences, Education, Social Work, and Business Administration. In 2014, female students accounted for 74% of total enrollment and male students accounted for 26%. Students with an in-state residence represented 46% of total enrollment and 54% came from other states and countries. African Americans account for approximately 90% of the student population.

Sampling Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used in this mixed methods research study. The rationale for purposeful sampling is that it allows the researcher to select “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The quantitative data sample consisted of first-time full-time freshmen students in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated by summer 2014. The qualitative data sample comprised a small group of purposefully selected students who enrolled as freshmen at the University more than six years ago; and who were still persisting toward an undergraduate degree during the spring 2016 semester.

Working with Human Subjects

The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Clark Atlanta University. The researcher ensured that the identities of the participants were not compromised. The sensitive personable identifiable information was handled with the utmost care and consideration. The researcher is on staff at the institution where the study took place and has access to student records. Moreover, the researcher has a responsibility to safeguard the confidentiality of student and staff data. The participants granted permission to the researcher to record the interviews. Pseudonyms were used in the transcribed interview responses and interview recordings will be kept in a safe location in the School of Education, as stated in the IRB guidelines. The name of the institution and the identities of the participants will not be revealed. Extreme care and

caution were taken to ensure that each participant was treated with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

Instrumentation

A documentary research approach was used to collect quantitative data from the student information system. Documentary research refers to the analysis of documents that contains information about the phenomenon we wish to study; however, the documents are often written for purposes other than research (Bailey, 1994). The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer. Descriptive statistical analysis was utilized to describe, interpret, and summarize the data collected.

The researcher used the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire to gain a holistic understanding of the impact that family, faculty, peers, and environmental influences had on student experiences while persisting toward an undergraduate degree. The qualitative data were composed of responses from GSOUP and a structured closed and open-ended interview protocol. Qualtrics Research Software, an online survey tool, was chosen to distribute the GSOUP questionnaire. Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected group of respondents who completed the survey and/or met the criteria. Creswell (2013) maintains that interviews play a central role in the data collection of case study research.

Participants and Location of Research

The participants for the quantitative component of the study were first-time full-time freshmen from the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years. A total of 211 participants were examined for the quantitative inquiry. Students who enrolled as freshmen at the University more than six years ago and who were still persisting toward an undergraduate degree during the spring 2016 semester were the participants for the qualitative part of the research study. The study took place at a private HBCU in an urban city in the southeastern region of the United States.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Data

The documentary research data were collected from secondary or existing data in the student information system (SIS). The researcher submitted the request and requirements for the quantitative data sets to developers in the Information Technology office at the University. Data sets included first-time full-time freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort who had a graduation term prior to or in the spring 2014 term.

The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer. Data for all study variables were structured and organized in rows and columns in a *cases-by-variables* arrangement for ease of use and better interpretation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). After the data collection was completed, the data were coded; as needed, and exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Qualitative Data

The request and requirements for the qualitative data sets were also submitted to developers in the Information Technology office at the University. The data set included all enrolled undergraduate students during the spring 2016 semester who were admitted as freshmen more than six years ago, either prior to or in the 2009-2010 academic year. A total of 27 students met the criteria. Three students were considered outliers due to the number of years that had passed since entry into the University and were removed from the sample; therefore, leaving a total of 24. The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer.

The researcher and a committee member developed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact that family, faculty, peers, and environmental influences had on student experiences while persisting toward a college degree. The mixed questionnaire comprised open-ended and closed-ended items.

The qualitative data were composed of responses from GSOUP and a structured closed and open-ended interview protocol. Qualtrics Research Software was chosen to distribute the GSOUP questionnaire. Responses to the survey were recorded in Qualtrics. An interview protocol composed of structured and open-ended questions was constructed. Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with purposefully selected respondents who completed the survey and/or met the criteria. Interview responses were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Statistical Applications

Quantitative

Documentary research data were collected from existing or secondary data in the student information system (SIS) to answer the research questions. The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer. Data for all study variables were structured and organized in rows and columns in a *cases-by-variables* arrangement for ease of use and better interpretation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). After the data collection was completed, the data were coded, as needed, in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, and exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Description of Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative

Documentary research data were collected from existing or secondary data in the SIS. The data set included all enrolled undergraduate students during the spring 2016 semester who were admitted as freshmen more than six years ago. The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer. The Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire was administered to 24 participants via electronic mail using Qualtrics Research Software to remain open for four weeks. The researcher sent follow-up emails to remind participants to complete the survey. After the completed surveys were recorded in Qualtrics, the researcher downloaded the responses and analyzed the results. Four participants

completed the survey and were contacted for follow-up interviews. The researcher conducted telephone and in-person interviews with three participants. The participants' responses were transcribed verbatim from the in-depth interviews.

Summary

Student persistence is a topic that should remain at the forefront in the minds and actions of educational leaders, practitioners, and policy makers in promoting success in postsecondary education. This chapter described the research methodology utilized in conducting a study at a private HBCU. The QUAN-QUAL Model or the triangulation mixed methods design was used in this mixed methods study. The data used in the study are secondary or existing data retrieved from the student information system. The quantitative component of the study employed a correlational research design to determine whether, and to what extent, certain variables were related to persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average. Descriptive statistics was applied to describe, analyze, and summarize the data. A case study research approach was utilized in the qualitative inquiry to explore the real-life experiences of a small group of students who did not graduate within six years and who were still persisting toward degree completion.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine the relationship between selected variables and persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average of first-time full-time freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort. Additionally, to get a holistic understanding of other factors that impact persistence, a qualitative inquiry was conducted into the real-life experiences of purposefully selected students who were still persisting at the University in spring 2016 toward an undergraduate degree past six years.

Quantitative Data Collection

The documentary research data were collected from existing documents in the student information system (SIS). The data included information for first-time full-time college freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years. The researcher submitted the request and requirements for the quantitative data sets to developers in the Information Technology office at the University.

The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer. Data for all study variables were structured and organized in rows and columns in a *cases-by-variables* arrangement for ease of use and better

interpretation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Descriptive statistical analyses were utilized to describe and interpret the data collected.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The Fall 2008 Cohort consisted of 814 first-time full-time freshmen that included 78% female and 22% male (see Figure 2). Transfer, readmitted, and part-time students were not included in the population for this study. Figure 3 shows a total of 346 students (43%) who graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years.

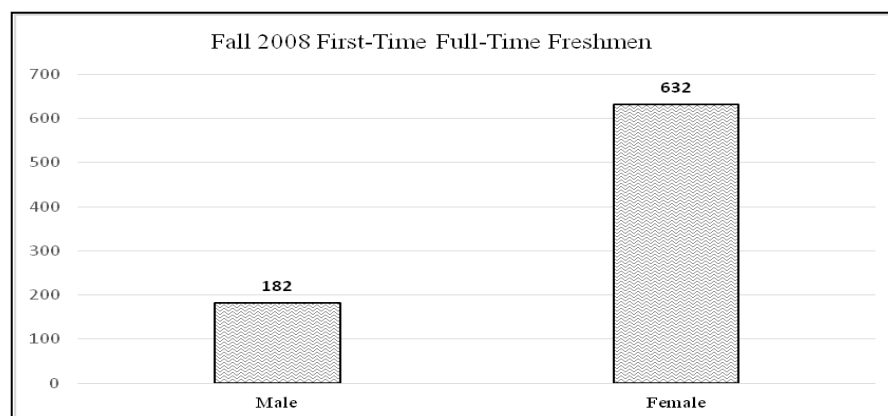


Figure 2. Number of male and female students.

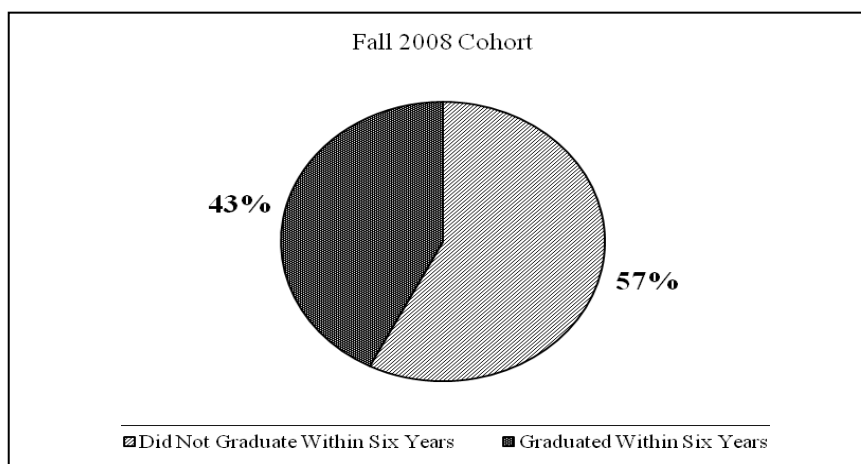


Figure 3. Percentage of first-time full-time students who graduated by year six.

Two students were awarded dual degrees, a bachelor's and master's degree, by year 6. The researcher could not determine whether the students completed the undergraduate degrees within four or five years. The two students were removed from the study sample; thereby, leaving a total number of 344 degree recipients by year 6. Females represented 82% ($n = 281$) of students who graduated within six years and male students represented the remaining 18% ($n = 63$) (see Figure 4).

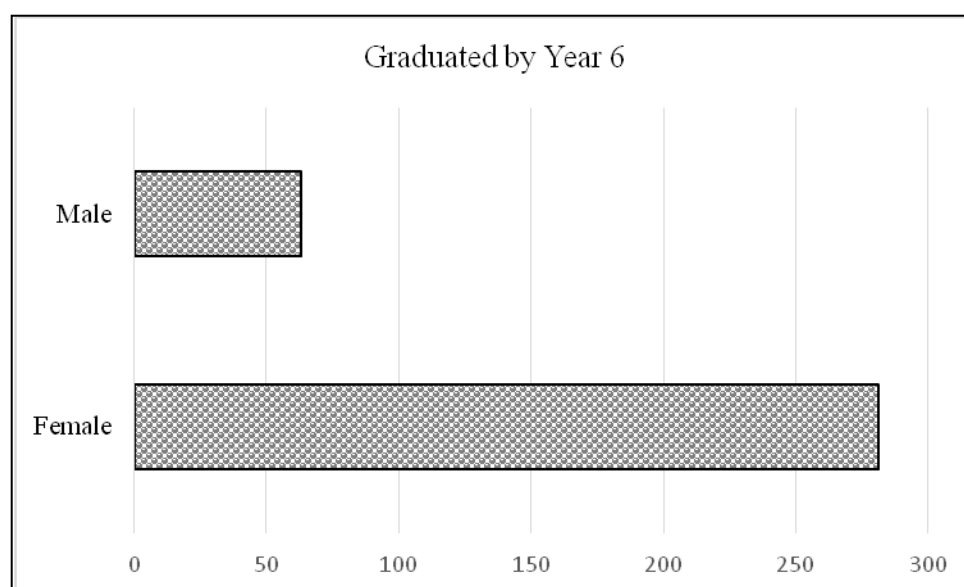


Figure 4. Students who graduated within six years by gender.

The number of female students who completed their undergraduate degree within four years was 188, five years, 76, and six years, 17. Moreover, in the male category, 22 graduated within four years, 29 in 5 years, and 12 in six years (see Figure 5).

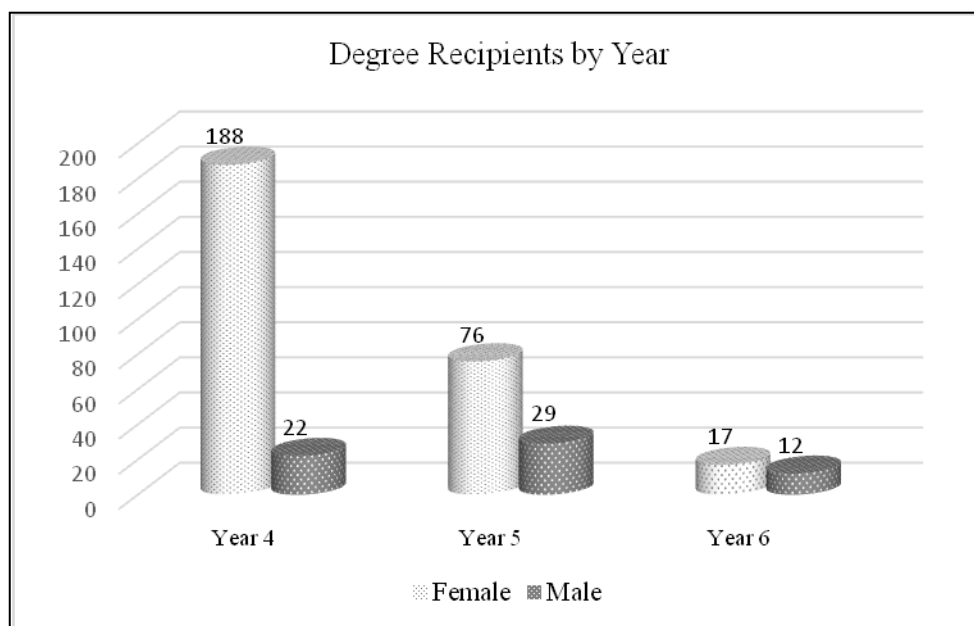


Figure 5. Number of male and female six-year graduates.

The researcher employed stratified random sampling by dividing the population into mutually exclusive groups by gender and by number of years to graduate.

Systematic sampling was used to select 50% of the female students who graduated by Year 4 and Year 5. Sampling was not used for the Year 6 females. Johnson and Christensen (2008) offered the following explanation:

A systematic sample is obtained by determining the sampling interval (i.e., population size divided by the desired sample size, k), selecting a random starting point between 1 and k , including 1 and k ; then selecting every k th element in the sampling frame. (p. 228)

The names of Year 4 female graduates were exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and sorted in alphabetical order. Beginning at the top of the column, every other row number was selected, resulting in a sample of size 93. For Year 5 female completers, the

names were also exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in alphabetical order. Starting at the bottom of the column, every other row number was selected for a sample of size 38. Sampling was not applied to the Year 6 female group; therefore, the total population of 17 was included in the study. Similarly, due to the small number of male students who graduated within six years, the entire population was studied. The totals for years four, five, and six were 22, 29, and 12, respectively. Figure 6 shows the sample size. The total size of sample was 211, representing 61% of the total population of 344 students who graduated by Year 6.

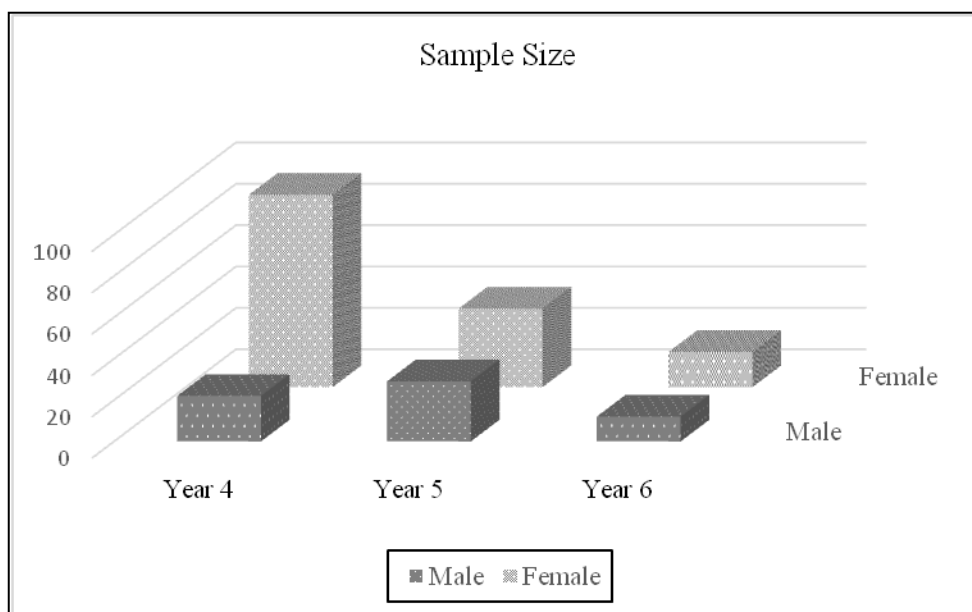


Figure 6. Sample size by year and gender.

After the data collection was completed, the data were coded; as needed, and exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. The researcher utilized the Pearson Correlation Coefficient to analyze the strength and direction of the relationships between both persistence to graduation within six years and

the final grade point average, and each independent variable of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, *Adjusted Gross Income*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine whether there were significant differences in the final GPA between the groups of Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6 graduates. The Tukey HSD post hoc was applied as a follow-up test to ascertain where, and for which years, the differences existed. Similarly, ANOVA was employed to establish whether a significant difference manifested in the total occurrences of financial aid awarded between graduates in Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6.

Treatment of Quantifiable Variables

Financial Aid Awarded

The University awarded multiple types of federal, state, and institutional financial aid funds to students in the Fall 2008 Cohort. Additionally, students also received outside or external scholarships from other sources such as churches, civic organizations, and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). First, the researcher described the financial aid data by classifying each type of aid awarded, and then by assigning a numerical code from 1 to 10. The range of 1-10 indicates a scale for students with the least amount of need (1 = No Financial Aid Awarded) to students with the greatest amount of need (10 = Alternative/Private Loans) (see Table 1). If a student was enrolled for a specific semester and did not receive any financial aid, a value of *1* was recorded for that term.

Table 1

Classification of Financial Aid Awarded

Financial Aid Awarded	Classification Code
No Financial Aid Awarded	1
Merit-Based Scholarships	2
External Scholarships	3
Federal Parent PLUS Loans	4
Federal Stafford Loans	5
State Grants	6
Federal Work Study	7
Federal Grants	8
Federal Perkins Loans	9
Alternative/Private Loans	10

Secondly, a numerical code for the corresponding financial aid award type was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for each individual and for each semester the student was enrolled at the University. Lastly, the researcher utilized a frequency distribution technique to count the number of times a particular financial aid award occurred for each student and for each semester, totaled the results, and then recorded the values in a separate column. The total number of occurrences for each student was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and exported into SPSS.

For example, in Table 2, a female student who graduated in Year 4 (F4-1) was enrolled from fall 2008 to spring 2012. In fall 2008, Student F4-1 received one alternative/private loan, one federal grant, and two Federal Stafford loans for a total of four occurrences.

In fall 2010, Student F4-1 was awarded one federal grant, federal work study, one state grant, two federal Stafford loans, and four merit-based scholarships, resulting in nine occurrences. The total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded for all terms was 57. The total number of 57 was transferred to SPSS for Student F4-1 under the Financial Aid Awarded variable heading (see Table 2).

Table 3 shows Student M5-26, a male student who graduated within five years, did not receive any financial aid while enrolled at the University. The numerical value of 1 was assigned to represent *No Financial Aid Awarded* for each semester Student M5-26 was enrolled. A total of 12 occurrences were recorded and exported to SPSS for M5-26 for variable Financial Aid Awarded.

Table 3

Student M5-26: Classification Codes Indicating No Financial Aid Awarded

ID	Term	Alternative/ Private Loans	Federal Perkins Loans	Federal Grants	Federal Work Study	State Grants	TOTAL
		10	9	8	7	6	
M5-26	Fall 2008	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Spring 2009	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Fall 2009	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Spring 2010	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Summer 2010	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Fall 2010	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Spring 2011	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Summer 2011	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Fall 2011	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Spring 2012	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Fall 2012	-	-	-	-	-	0
	Spring 2013	-	-	-	-	-	0
M5-26	TOTAL	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3 (continued)

ID	Term	Federal Stafford Loans	Federal Parent PLUS Loans	External Scholarships	Merit- Based Scholarships	No Financial Aid Awarded	TOTAL
		5	4	3	2	1	
M5-26	Fall 2008	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Spring 2009	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Fall 2009	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Spring 2010	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Summer 2010	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Fall 2010	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Spring 2011	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Summer 2011	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Fall 2011	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Spring 2012	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Fall 2012	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Spring 2013	-	-	-	-	1	1
	TOTAL	0	0	0	0	12	12

High School GPA

The high school GPA for 208 students was recorded on a 4.0 scale. High school grade point averages were not available in the student information system for three students.

ACT Composite Score

The ACT Composite score was the average of the English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning test scores. If more than one set of scores was reported, the data reflected the highest composite score earned during a single test. The highest possible ACT Composite test score for fall 2008 college entrants was 36.

SAT Combined Score

The SAT Combined score was the total of verbal scores and mathematics scores. If more than one set of scores was reported, the data reflected the highest combined score earned during a single test. The highest possible SAT Combined test score for students entering college entrants in fall 2008 was 2400.

First-Year First-Semester GPA

The first-year first-semester GPA was recorded for each student at the end of the fall 2008 semester. The grade point average was calculated based on a 4.0 scale.

First-Year Cumulative GPA

The first-year cumulative GPA for each student was recorded at the end of the spring 2009 semester. The grade point average was calculated based on a 4.0 scale.

Adjusted Gross Income

The adjusted gross income (AGI) amount was reported on the FAFSA by either the parent or the independent student for the 2008-2009 academic year. If a FAFSA was not on file for 2008-2009 for a student, then the adjusted gross income was reported for the first academic year that a FAFSA was placed on file in the SIS. The data showed three students did not have a FAFSA on file with the University for any academic year. The adjusted gross incomes reported in the study ranged from zero income (\$0) to \$350,000. A grouped frequency distribution was used to analyze the AGI in mutually exclusive and exhaustive intervals of \$14,999.

Table 4 displays the numerical codes assigned to each income group from 1 to 24 for each student. The lowest income group received a value of 1 and the highest income group received a value of 24.

Table 4

Adjusted Gross Income Classification Codes

Classification	Adjusted Gross	Classification	Adjusted Gross
Code	Income	Code	Income
1	\$0 - \$14,999	13	\$180,000 - \$194,999
2	\$15,000 - \$29,999	14	\$195,000 - \$209,999
3	\$30,000 - \$44,999	15	\$210,000 - \$224,999
4	\$45,000 - \$59,999	16	\$225,000 - \$239,999
5	\$60,000 - \$74,999	17	\$240,000 - \$254,999
6	\$75,000 - \$89,999	18	\$255,000 - \$269,999
7	\$90,000 - \$104,999	19	\$270,000 - \$284,999
8	\$105,000 - \$119,999	20	\$285,000 - \$299,999
9	\$120,000 - \$134,999	21	\$300,000 - \$314,999
10	\$135,000 - \$149,999	22	\$315,000 - \$329,999
11	\$150,000 - \$164,999	23	\$330,000 - \$344,999
12	\$165,000 - \$179,999	24	\$345,000 - \$359,999

On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing

The University had a policy that required all undergraduate students who had earned less than 58 credit hours to stay on campus. Typically, it takes two academic years to earn 58 hours if a student is full-time and maintains a status of satisfactory

academic progress. The researcher collected data for students who lived in University-owned residence halls located on the main campus beginning in fall 2010 and ending in the student's last term of enrollment. Other housing options in close proximity to the main campus not owned by the University may have been available to students in the Fall 2008 Cohort; however, that data were not maintained in the SIS at the time and not accessible to the researcher. On-campus housing was determined if a student lived on campus for one or more terms after the first two years, beginning fall 2010.

Alternatively, off-campus housing was denoted when a student did not live in a University-owned residence hall for any term after the first two years. The numerical value designated for housing was 1 = On Campus and 2 = Off Campus.

Gender

The categorical variable of gender was indicated in this research study by 1 = Male and 2 = Female.

Graduation within Six Years

Students in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years of their freshman year were studied. The size of sample for males in Year 4 was 22, Year 5 was 29, and Year 6 was 12. The sample for Year 4 females was 93, Year 5 females 38, and Year 6 females 17. The summer semesters at the University are treated as "trailing" semesters and are considered a part of the preceding academic year. Therefore, for this study, each academic year included three semesters: fall, spring, and summer. Students who started matriculating in fall 2008 and graduated by summer 2012 were considered to be four-

year completers, by summer 2013, five-year completers, and six-year completers, by summer 2014.

Final GPA

The final GPA utilized in this study was the cumulative grade point average recorded in the student information system for students in the term that the undergraduate degrees were awarded. The final grade point average was calculated based on a 4.0 scale.

Quantitative Data Response to Research Questions 1-11

Findings

This section presents the descriptive statistical analysis utilized to answer the research questions pertaining to the relationship between selected variables and both persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average. The research questions have been restated and followed by the findings from the quantitative inquiry.

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a positive statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. The correlation coefficient was .152 and the significance was .027, with a significance level of 0.05. The two variables move in the same direction. The analysis revealed that as the total number of financial aid occurrences increased, the number of years to graduate also increased. Similarly, as the

total number of financial aid occurrences decreased, the number of years to graduate decreased (see Table 5).

Table 5

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Research Questions 1-8

		ON-OFF CAMP	% ON CAMP	AGI	FY GPA	FYFS GPA	SAT COMB	ACT COMP	HSGPA	FINAID
YEAR	Pearson Correlation	.153*	-.291**	-.008	-.282**	-.236**	-.183*	-.118	-.164*	.152*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	.000	.913	.000	.001	.035	.204	.018	.027
	N	211	210	208	211	211	133	117	208	211

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*, Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school GPA?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school GPA. The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a negative statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school GPA. The Pearson correlation was -.164 and the significance is .018 with a significance level of 0.05. The results indicated that as the high school GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased. Likewise, as the high school GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased (see Table 5).

RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and ACT Composite scores?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and ACT Composite scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient did not show a statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and ACT Composite scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.118$ and the significance was $.204$. Although the relationship was not statistically significant, the two variables—persistence to graduation within six years and ACT Composite scores—were inversely related. The higher the ACT Composite scores were, the fewer number of years it took to graduate (see Table 5).

RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and SAT Combined scores?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and SAT Combined scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient showed a negative statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and SAT Combined scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.183$ and the significance is $.035$ with a significance level of 0.05 . The results indicated that as SAT Combined scores increased, the number of years to graduate decreased. Similarly, as SAT Combined scores decreased, the number of years to graduate increased (see Table 5).

RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year first-semester GPA?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year first-semester GPA. The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed that a negative statistically significant

relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and first-year first-semester GPA. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.236$ and the significance is $.001$ with a 0.01 level of significance. The results strongly suggested that as the first-year first-semester GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased, and, as the first-year first-semester GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased (see Table 5).

RQ6: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA. The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed that a negative statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.282$ and the significance was $.000$ with a 0.01 level of significance. The results showed that as the first-year cumulative GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased, and, as the first-year cumulative GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased (see Table 5).

RQ7: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and parent or independent student adjusted gross income as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and parent or independent student adjusted gross income. The Pearson correlation coefficient did not indicate that a statistically significant relationship existed between persistence to graduation within six years and

parent or independent student adjusted gross income. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.008$ and the significance was $.913$. Consequently, the relationship was not statistically significant; however, the two variables slightly moved in the opposite direction (see Table 5).

RQ8: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the percent of time living on campus after earning 58 credit hours. The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a negative statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the percent of time living on campus after 58 hours. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $-.291$ and the significance was $.000$, with a 0.01 level of significance. The results showed that living on campus and the number of years to graduate were inversely related. Moreover, as the number of semesters living on campus increased, the number of years to graduate decreased. On the other hand, the less time spent living on campus, the more time it took to graduate (see Table 5).

A second Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to examine the relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on or off campus. On-campus housing is denoted by the numerical value of 1 and off-campus housing is denoted by the numerical value of 2 . The Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a positive statistically significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on or off campus after earning 58 hours. The Pearson

correlation coefficient was .153 and the significance was .027, with a significance level of 0.05; the two variables moved in the same direction. The results showed that the higher the on- or off-campus score was, the higher the number of years to graduate. On the opposite end, the lower the on- or off-campus score was, the lower the number of years to graduate (see Table 5).

A regression analysis was performed to determine which variables could best predict persistence. In Table 6, the regression showed that *FIN GPA* (final GPA) was the strongest predictor of *Persistence* in this sample. The R Square Change showed a weight of .160, which meant the change contributed 16% to the variation in *Persistence*. The other impacting variables were *Percent of Time on Campus*, *Financial Aid Awarded*, and the relative time spent living in *On-Campus* or *Off-Campus Housing*. These four variables accounted for a total of 24% of variation in the dependent variable, *Persistence*.

Table 6

Regression of Independent Variables on Year (Persistence)

Model Summary (e)									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change Statistics			Sig. F Change
						F Change	df1	df2	
1	.401(a)	.160	.156	.655	.160	38.807	1	203	.000
2	.454(b)	.206	.198	.639	.045	11.491	1	202	.001
3	.490(c)	.240	.229	.626	.034	9.093	1	201	.003
4	.506(d)	.256	.241	.621	.016	4.225	1	200	.041

a. Predictors: (Constant), FIN GPA

b. Predictors: (Constant), FIN GPA, % On Campus

c. Predictors: (Constant), FIN GPA, % On Campus, FINAID

d. Predictors: (Constant), FIN GPA, % On Campus, FINAID, ON-OFF CAMPUS

e. Dependent Variable: Year

The remaining variation was accounted for by other variables, though not as significant as these four were. The last column in Table 6, Sig. F Change, showed the level of significance of the four variables. Other variables not in the study could also account for variation in *Persistence*, such as family support and other external factors identified in the qualitative section of the research study.

RQ9: Is there a significant relationship between final GPA and the number of years to graduate, total occurrences of financial aid awarded, high school GPA, ACT Composite score, SAT Combined score, first-year first-semester GPA, first-year cumulative GPA, adjusted gross income, and on-campus or off-campus housing?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was utilized to determine whether, and to what extent, the two dependent variables, *Persistence to Graduation within Six Years* (denoted as *Number of Years to Graduate*) and *Final GPA* were related. Similarly, a Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to examine the relationship between *Final GPA* and the independent variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, *Adjusted Gross Income*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*.

Variable 1: Number of Years to Graduate (Year 4, Year 5, Year 6). A

Pearson correlation coefficient showed a negative statistically significant relationship between graduating within six years and the final GPA. The correlation coefficient was -.414 and the significance was .000, with a 0.01 level of significance (see Table 7).

Table 7

Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 9

		ON-OFF		% ON		FY	FYFS	SAT	ACT		
		YEAR	CAMP	CAMP	AGI	GPA	GPA	COMB	COMP	HSGPA	FINAID
FINAL GPA	Pearson Correlation	-.414**	-.146*	.217**	-.044	.688**	.615**	.365**	.255**	.464**	.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.034	.002	.533	.000	.000	.000	.006	.000	.316
	N	211	211	210	208	211	211	133	117	208	211

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The analysis suggested that as the final GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased. Likewise, as the final GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased (see Table 7).

Variable 2: Frequency of Financial Aid Awarded. There was no statistically significant relationship between final GPA and the total number occurrences of financial aid awarded. The Pearson correlation coefficient was .069 and the significance was .316 (see Table 7).

Variable 3: High School GPA. A Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a positive statistically significant relationship between the final GPA and high school GPA. The correlation coefficient was .464 and the significance was .000, with a .001 significance level. The direction of the final GPA and high school GPA was the same; as the high school GPA increased, the final GPA increased. On the other hand, as the high school GPA declined, the final GPA declined as well (see Table 7).

Variable 4: ACT Composite Score. A Pearson correlation coefficient showed a positive statistically significant relationship between final GPA and ACT Composite

scores. The correlation coefficient was .255 and significance was .006, with a .001 level of significance. The two variables were moving in the same direction; therefore, as the ACT Composite score increased, the final GPA increased (see Table 7).

Variable 5: SAT Combined Score. A Pearson correlation coefficient showed a positive statistically significant relationship between final GPA and SAT Combined score. The correlation coefficient was .365 and significance was .000, with a .001 significance level. The final GPA and the SAT Combined score moved in the same direction; therefore, as SAT Combined scores decreased, the final GPA decreased (see Table 7).

Variable 6: First-Year First-Semester GPA. A Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a positive statistically significant relationship between final GPA and first-year first-semester GPA. The correlation coefficient was .615 and significance was .000, with a .001 significance level. The final GPA increased as the first-year first-semester GPA increased. Furthermore, as first-year first-semester GPA decreased, so did the final GPA (see Table 7).

Variable 7: First-Year Cumulative GPA. A Pearson correlation coefficient divulged a positive statistically significant relationship between final GPA and first-year cumulative GPA. The correlation coefficient was .688 and significance is .000, with a .001 level of significance. Final GPA decreased with a decrease in the first-year cumulative GPA. Likewise, as the first-year cumulative GPA increased, the final GPA increased (see Table 7).

Variable 8: Adjusted Gross Income. There was no statistically significant relationship between final GPA and adjusted gross income. The correlation coefficient

was $-.044$ and the significance was $.533$; the two variables tended to lean in opposite directions (see Table 7).

Variable 9: On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing. A Pearson correlation coefficient showed a positive statistically significant relationship between final GPA and percent of time living on campus after earning 58 credit hours. The correlation coefficient was $.217$ and the significance was $.002$, with a 0.01 level of significance. Final GPA and living on campus moved in the same direction; as the percent of time living on campus increased, the final GPA increased (see Table 7).

Furthermore, the Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a negative statistically significant relationship between final GPA and living on or off campus after earning 58 credit hours. The correlation coefficient was $-.146$ and the significance was $.034$, with a 0.05 level of significance. The analysis disclosed that the higher the on- or off-campus score (On = 1, Off = 2), the lower the final GPA. Conversely, the lower the on- or off-campus score, the higher the final GPA (see Table 7).

RQ10: Is there a significant difference in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within four years than the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within five or six years?

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to determine whether a significant difference existed in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded between groups in Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6. Table 8 shows a significance of $.083$; therefore, there were no significant differences between the groups.

Table 8

Financial Aid ANOVA between Groups in Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6

FINAID	ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	944.594	2	472.297	2.524	.083
Within Groups	38919.074	208	187.111		
Total	39863.668	210			

RQ11: Is there a significant difference in the final GPA and persistence to graduation in Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6?

A Pearson correlation coefficient showed a significant relationship between *Year* and *Final GPA* (see Table 7); however, the correlations did not show how the relationship was determined. Therefore, ANOVA was used to establish whether a significant difference in *Final GPA* existed between the groups in Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6. The analysis shown in Table 9 revealed a statistically significant difference of .000.

Table 9

Final GPA ANOVA between Groups in Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6

FINAL GPA	ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.217	2	3.109	25.652	.000
Within Groups	25.206	208	.121		
Total	31.423	210			

Subsequently, a Tukey HSD post hoc test in Table 10 confirmed a significant difference of .000 between Year 4 and Year 5, and a significant difference of .000 between Year 4 and Year 6. There was no significant difference between Year 5 and Year 6 (Sig. = .871).

Table 10

Post Hoc Comparisons of Final GPA to Number of Years to Graduate (Year)

Multiple Comparisons						
Tukey HSD: Dependent Variable—FINAL GPA						
(I) Year	(J) Year	(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
4.0	5.0	.33216*	.05350	.000	.2059	.4585
	6.0	.37091*	.07234	.000	.2002	.5417
5.0	4.0	-.33216*	.05350	.000	-.4585	-.2059
	6.0	.03875	.07738	.871	-.1439	.2214
6.0	4.0	-.37091*	.07234	.000	-.5417	-.2002
	5.0	-.03875	.07738	.871	-.2214	.1439

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The *Final GPA* mean for students who graduated by Year 4 was 3.2457, Year 5 was 2.9136, and Year 6 was 2.8748 (see Table 11).

Table 11

Final GPA Mean Scores among Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6 Graduates

FINAL GPA - YEAR	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
4.0	3.2457	115	.30948
5.0	2.9136	67	.41908
6.0	2.8748	29	.31032
Total	3.0893	211	.38683

Qualitative Data Collection

Persistence in postsecondary education is not only affected by high school grade point averages and college entrance test scores associated with academic factors; nevertheless, nonacademic factors play a critical role, as well. External factors such as financial stability, family beliefs about education, support person, and college fit impact a student's college readiness and success in college (Sommerfeld, 2011; Nasim et al., 2005; Sedlacek, 1993).

The main quantitative sample in this research study included students who had already graduated and were not available to provide data to the researcher on the influence of those external nonacademic factors while in college. For that reason, using a case study approach, the researcher sought to explore the real-life experiences from a cadre of purposefully selected students who enrolled as freshmen at the University more than six years ago and who were still persisting toward an undergraduate degree during the spring 2016 semester. According to Creswell (2013), case study research is a qualitative approach in which the researcher "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection" (p. 97).

The request and requirements for the qualitative data sets were submitted to developers in the Information Technology office at the University. The data were organized and reports were created utilizing Structured Query Language (SQL) in the Argos Enterprise Reporting Solution by Evisions, Microsoft Access, and SQL Developer.

The researcher and a committee member developed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire to gain a holistic understanding of the impact that family, faculty, peers, and environmental influences had on student

experiences while persisting toward a college degree. The qualitative data were composed of responses from GSOUP and a structured closed and open-ended interview protocol. Qualtrics Research Software was chosen to distribute the GSOUP questionnaire. Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected group of respondents who completed the survey and/or met the criteria.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The researcher obtained a data set of all enrolled undergraduate students during the spring 2016 semester who were admitted as freshmen more than six years ago, either prior to or in the 2009-2010 academic year. The six-year graduation period for students who enrolled as freshmen in 2009-2010 was considered to be summer 2015. One student in the survey deferred admission into the University from fall 2009 to spring 2010. The researcher determined the six-year graduation period for the student who enrolled in spring 2010 to be fall 2015; however, the student was still persisting in spring 2016. A total of 27 students met the criteria.

Three students were considered outliers and removed from the sample due to a start term of fall 1985, summer 1999, and spring 2001. The start terms of the 24 remaining students were: spring 2003 = 1, fall 2006 = 5, fall 2007 = 6, fall 2008 = 1, fall 2009 = 10, and spring 2010 = 1. Qualtrics Research Software was utilized to distribute the GSOUP questionnaire online to 24 purposefully selected enrolled students by electronic mail. A total of four surveys were completed and recorded electronically in Qualtrics.

The Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire consisted of 44 items and was mainly designed to investigate the influence on persistence to graduation of non-academic factors such as family support and expectations, financial support, peer relations, faculty-student relationship, engagement, support services, and competing interests. Moreover, three in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim to describe and analyze the cases in search of themes that emanated from participants as they shared their reflections, perspectives, and real-life experiences on their journey to becoming a college graduate.

Qualitative Analysis of Survey Responses

The survey responses from each participant were analyzed in this section and presented in tables. Four participants completed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the level of agreement or disagreement on GSOUP. The Likert items were (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. Survey Questions (SQ) 18-39 were the focal point of the qualitative inquiry to discern the relevance of nonacademic factors and the influence on persistence toward a college degree.

Survey Questions 18-21 sought to gain insight on the student's perception of family support and expectations while persisting toward degree completion.

SQ18: My parents/family encouraged me to go to college. The contextual framework for this question was to determine the level of inspiration, reinforcement, and encouragement that the students received from their families in pursuing a college

degree. The responses indicated that 75% of respondents selected *Strongly Agree* and 25% selected *Agree*. An analysis of the responses suggested that 100% of the respondents had a positive perception and felt their families encouraged them to attend college (see Table 12).

Table 12

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #18

SQ #18: My parents/family encouraged me to go to college.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4					X

SQ19: My parents/family expect me to earn a college degree. The contextual framework for the question was to discern whether or not the respondents felt their families expected them to earn a college degree. The responses indicated that 75% of respondents selected *Strongly Agree* and 25% selected *Agree*. An analysis of the responses suggested that 100% of the respondents had a positive perception and felt their families expected them to earn a college degree (see Table 13).

Table 13

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #19

SQ #19: My parents/family expect me to earn a college degree.					
	Strongly		Neither Agree		Strongly
	Disagree	Disagree	nor Disagree	Agree	Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4					X

SQ20: The support of my parents/family is important to me in achieving my educational goals. The context for the question was to measure the level of perceived support that the respondents received from their families in achieving their educational goals (see Table 14).

Table 14

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #20

SQ #20: The support of my parents/family is important to me in achieving my educational goals.					
	Strongly		Neither Agree		Strongly
	Disagree	Disagree	nor Disagree	Agree	Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4					X

The responses indicated that 75% of respondents selected *Strongly Agree* and 25% selected *Agree*. An analysis of the responses suggested that 100% of the respondents had a positive perception of family support in accomplishing their academic and educational aspirations.

SQ21: I can talk to my parents/family about my career goals. The context for the question was to determine whether or not the respondents felt they could talk to their families about their career goals. The responses revealed that 75% of respondents selected *Strongly Agree* and 25% selected *Agree*. An analysis of the responses implied that 100% of the respondents could talk to their parents or families about their career goals (see Table 15).

Table 15

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #21

SQ #21: I can talk to my parents/family about my career goals.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4					X

Survey Questions 22-25 sought to understand the role that financial aid and other financial resources played in the lives of the college students and their perception of financial support.

SQ22: I receive adequate financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and/or loans to pay for college expenses. The purpose for the question was to determine if the respondents received adequate financial aid to pay for college expenses. The responses revealed that 25% of respondents selected *Agree*, 25% selected *Disagree*, and 50% selected *Strongly Disagree*. An analysis of the responses implied that three-fourths of the respondents had a negative perception and felt they did not receive an adequate amount of financial aid (see Table 16).

Table 16

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #22

SQ #22: I receive adequate financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and/or loans to pay for college expenses.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1				X	
Respondent 2		X			
Respondent 3	X				
Respondent 4	X				

SQ23: My parents/family cannot contribute to my college education. The purpose for this question was to ascertain whether or not the parents or families could contribute financially to the respondents' college education. The responses disclosed that 25% of respondents perceived that their families could contribute financially by selecting *Disagree* and; 75% verified that the family could not contribute to their college education by selecting either *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. An analysis of the responses implied that at

least three-fourths of the respondents believed their families could not contribute financially (see Table 17).

Table 17

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #23

SQ #23: My parents/family <i>cannot</i> contribute to my college education.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1		X			
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

SQ24: Financial aid was a key factor in my decision to attend college. The context of this question was to determine the role that financial aid played in the respondents' decision to attend college (see Table 18).

Table 18

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #24

SQ #24: Financial aid was a key factor in my decision to attend college.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1				X	
Respondent 2		X			
Respondent 3		X			
Respondent 4				X	

The responses disclosed that 50% of respondents selected *Disagree* and did not consider financial aid to be a factor; and 50% marked *Agree* to indicate that financial aid was a factor in making the decision to attend college. An analysis of the responses revealed that half of the respondents did not deem financial aid as a determinant in pursuing a college degree.

SQ25: I am not concerned about paying for my college expenses. The contextual framework of this question was to discern whether or not the respondents were concerned about the ability to pay for college. The responses revealed that 100% of respondents, in fact, had some concerns about the ability to pay by selecting either *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*. An analysis of SQ25 strongly indicated that the ability to pay is a major concern for college degree seeking students who persist beyond six years (see Table 19).

Table 19

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #25

SQ #25: I am not concerned about paying for my college expenses.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1	X				
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3		X			
Respondent 4	X				

Survey Questions 26-30 engaged the respondents in determining the substance of course content and the level of comfort they felt in building relationships with faculty and academic advisors.

SQ26: I am satisfied with the content of the courses in my major program of study. The purpose of the question was to discern whether or not the respondents were satisfied with the course content in their major program of study. The responses showed that 25% of respondents were not satisfied with the course content by selecting *Strongly Disagree*; and 75% were satisfied with the academic rigor of the courses; thereby, selecting *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. An analysis of the responses revealed that a fourth of the respondents were not satisfied with the course content of their major program of study (see Table 20).

Table 20

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #26

SQ #26: I am satisfied with the content of the courses in my major program of study.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

SQ27: I feel comfortable talking to one or more of my instructors about course requirements and classroom activities. The context of the question was to ascertain to what degree the respondents felt comfortable talking to at least one of their

instructors about course requirements. The responses disclosed that 100% of respondents selected either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. An analysis revealed that all of the respondents had a positive perception about discussing course requirements and classroom activities with their instructors (see Table 21).

Table 21

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #27

SQ #27: I feel comfortable talking to one or more of my instructors about course requirements and classroom activities.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2				X	
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

SQ28: I do not feel comfortable initiating contact with one or more of my instructors outside the classroom. The purpose of the question was to explore the respondent's comfort level in initiating interactions with their instructors outside the classroom. The responses showed that 50% of respondents selected *Strongly Disagree*; signifying that they felt comfortable initiating contact with instructors outside the classroom. The remaining 50% of respondents selected *Agree*. An analysis revealed that half of the respondents felt comfortable initiating contact, while the other half did not feel comfortable initiating communications outside the classroom setting (see Table 22).

Table 22

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #28

SQ #28: I <i>do not</i> feel comfortable initiating contact with one or more of my instructors outside the classroom.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1	X				
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

SQ29: My academic advisor is interested in my educational and career

goals. The contextual framework for this question was to determine whether the respondents felt the academic advisors were interested in their educational and career goals. The responses indicated that 50% of respondents had a positive perception and believed that academic advisors had an interest in their educational pursuits and career paths, thereby selecting *Strongly Agree or Agree*. The respondents who did not feel their academic advisors were interested represented the remaining 50% by selecting *Strongly Disagree*. An analysis revealed that the responses were evenly split. One half of the respondents perceived that their advisors were not interested in their goals and the other half felt they were interested (see Table 23).

SQ30: I meet with my academic advisor at least one time each semester. The

contextual framework for the question was to determine how many times, if any, the respondents met with their academic advisor during each term.

Table 23

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #29

SQ #29: My academic advisor is interested in my educational and career goals.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4	X				

The responses revealed 50% of respondents did not meet with their academic advisor at least once each term by selecting *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*. The remaining respondents, 50%, selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*; indicating they did meet with their advisors at least one time each semester. An analysis showed that at least half of the respondents met with their academic advisors every term while one-half did not (see Table 24).

Table 24

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #30

SQ #30: I meet with my academic advisor at least one time each semester.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2		X			
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4	X				

Survey Questions 31-32 sought to understand the rapport that the respondents developed with their peer colleagues surrounding their college experiences.

SQ31: I can talk to my friends about my college experiences. The context of this question was to determine whether or not the respondents had friends they could share their lived college experiences with. The responses implicated 75% of respondents felt they were able to talk to their friends about college experiences and, therefore, selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. The 25% of respondents that chose *Disagree* indicated they did not have a friend to share their college experiences with. The analysis showed that at least a fourth of the respondents did not have a positive perception of talking to their peers about college experiences (see Table 25).

Table 25

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #31

SQ #31: I can talk to my friends about my college experiences.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3		X			
Respondent 4				X	

SQ32: I do not have a college student friend who I can talk to about my educational plans. The context of the question was to discern if the respondents had a friend in college who they could talk to about their educational aspirations. The responses implicated 75% of respondents selected *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*,

inferring they had a college friend to talk to about educational goals. The remaining 25% of respondents selected *Agree*, which revealed they did not have a college friend to talk to about educational plans. The analysis showed that at least a fourth of the respondents did not have a peer in college with whom they could discuss their educational plans (see Table 26).

Table 26

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #32

SQ #32: I <i>do not</i> have a college student friend who I can talk to about my educational plans.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1	X				
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4		X			

Survey Questions 33-34 sought to understand the respondents' perception of learning assistance and support services that were available to aid in achieving their academic goals.

SQ33: Tutoring services are available when I need assistance. The contextual framework of the question was to discern the respondents' perception of the availability of tutoring services at the University. The responses implicated 25% of the respondents were neutral and selected *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, while 75% of respondents selected *Agree*. An analysis revealed that two-thirds of the respondents felt that the availability of tutoring services was sufficient. Additionally, the responses inferred that at least a fourth

of the respondents may not have felt a need for tutoring and, therefore, did not take advantage of the services (see Table 27).

Table 27

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #33

SQ #33: Tutoring services are available when I need assistance.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1				X	
Respondent 2			X		
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

SQ34: Campus Internet and wireless access are available to meet my academic needs. The context of the question was to determine whether or not institutional factors such as campus Internet and wireless services were adequate in meeting the academic needs of the respondents (see Table 28).

Table 28

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #34

SQ #34: Campus Internet and wireless access are available to meet my academic needs.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2				X	
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

The responses showed 100% of the respondents selected either *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. An analysis suggested that all respondents felt that the Internet and wireless technology were sufficient.

Survey Questions 35-36 sought to determine the importance of student engagement and civic responsibility in the life of the college student.

SQ35: *I am not interested in being a part of a campus club or organization.*

The context of the question was to ascertain whether or not the respondents were interested in participating in campus organizations. The responses showed 50% of the respondents selected either *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*, indicating they did have interest in joining or becoming a part of a campus organization. Respondents who showed no interest represented 25% by selecting *Agree*; while 25% remained neutral by selecting *Neither Agree nor Disagree*. An analysis suggested that half of the respondents had a positive perception about engagement and were interested in being involved in a campus organization (see Table 29).

Table 29

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #35

SQ #35: <i>I am not interested in being a part of a campus club or organization.</i>					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1			X		
Respondent 2	X				
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4		X			

SQ36: Participating in campus and community activities is an important part of my college experience. The context of the question was to determine the significance of campus and community involvement in the college experiences of the respondents. The responses showed 75% of the respondents felt that participating in campus and community activities were important and selected either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. The remaining 25% selected *Neither Agree nor Disagree*. An analysis suggested that three-fourths of the respondents had a positive perception of the importance of student involvement (see Table 30).

Table 30

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #36

SQ #36: Participating in campus and community activities is an important part of my college experience.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1			X		
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4				X	

Survey Questions 37-39 explored potential barriers that contributed to the respondents' not completing their undergraduate degrees within six years.

SQ37: Financial resources played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years. The context of the question was to determine the level of agreement or disagreement that financial resources played a part in respondents not completing their degrees within six years. The responses showed that

100% of the respondents selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. An analysis implicated that all of the respondents felt that financial resources was a key factor in not graduating within a six-year period (see Table 31).

Table 31

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #37

SQ #37: Financial resources played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1					X
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3					X
Respondent 4				X	

SQ38: Academic performance played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years. The context of the question was to determine the level of agreement or disagreement that academic performance played a part in respondents not completing their degrees within six years. The responses showed that 50% of the respondents did not feel that academic performance was a barrier by selecting either *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*. The remaining 50% selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, which signified that academic performance was a key element. An analysis indicated that the responses were evenly split. Half of the respondents felt that academic performance was a contributing factor in not completing their undergraduate degree within six years, while the remaining half did not (see Table 32).

Table 32

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #38

SQ #38: Academic performance played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1	X				
Respondent 2		X			
Respondent 3				X	
Respondent 4					X

SQ39: Family, career, and/or personal obligations played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years. The context of the question was to determine the level of agreement or disagreement that environmental influences such as family, career, and personal obligations played a role in respondents not completing their degrees within six years.

The responses showed that 50% of respondents selected either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, and the other 50% selected either *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*. An analysis revealed that half of respondents felt that personal obligations and other competing interests were contributing factors in not completing their undergraduate degree in six years, whereas, the remaining half did not perceive these obligations to be an obstacle (see Table 33).

Table 33

Participants' Responses to Survey Question #39

SQ #39: Family, career, and/or personal obligations played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Respondent 1				X	
Respondent 2					X
Respondent 3		X			
Respondent 4	X				

Interview Participants

The interview participants in this study were the respondents who either completed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire and/or met the criteria for the study. Three participants were interviewed. Pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher to protect the identity of the participants. The participants are referred to by their pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

Description of Participants

Laila is an African-American female who enrolled as a freshman in spring 2010. She is a senior psychology major. Laila is determined, reflective, and perceptive.

Bethany is an African-American female who enrolled as a freshman in fall 2009. She is a senior psychology major. Bethany is creative, enthusiastic, and energetic.

Akeelah is an African-American female who enrolled as a freshman in fall 2009. She is a senior business administration major, with a concentration in marketing. Akeelah is focused, motivated, and confident.

Case Themes from Qualitative Research Findings

Resilience, gratefulness, and persistence were testaments to the essence of the human spirit in the young women who were interviewed for this study. Individual themes surfaced and revealed critical and, sometimes, life changing seasons in their lives along the journey to becoming a college graduate. Common themes arose in the stories of human experience as the participants shared their feelings and thoughts surrounding persistence to graduation. The themes that emerged from the commonality of their lived experiences are described as: (a) Ensuring the Future, (b) Importance of Family Support, (c) Need for Financial Aid, (d) The Right Fit, and (e) Enduring to the End.

Case Theme 1: Ensuring the Future

This theme explores the participants' perspective on the importance of earning a college degree. The participants have the determination and motivation to create a future of financial stability, creativity, individual achievement, and servant leadership.

Career goals and family were crucial in Laila persisting toward a college degree. Both parents had some college, but neither had finished. She expounded on the family's college aspirations:

Mainly, so I can go the route that I am trying to go, as far as my career. I think it is important for my family, too. Because everybody has some college, but no one has really finished. It started with my age group in my family – the grandkids.

My brother graduated; well, my cousin that I call my brother. He graduated first, then his brother; and then now it's me. I will be the next one. We're going to be the first ones to finish. (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

Laila's parents are huge supporters and play a central role as she continues to persist toward graduation. She stated the following:

They want me to graduate just because, you know, they didn't and a lot of people in our family didn't – on both sides. But, I think it's mainly because of my future. They want me to be able to hold my own and not be dependent on them or anybody else. (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

A diversified business portfolio is the main thrust behind Bethany's persistence to graduation. She feels that a college degree will help her get a good paying job so that she can save money to make down payments on her future business ventures. Bethany made a declaration:

I want to have my own businesses; different things. I want to have an orphanage, a restaurant, a night club...hotels, condos. So, I feel like this will help me go further and I want to go to graduate school. (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Career goals, high scholastic achievements, and an advanced degree compels Akeelah to persist to graduation. She affirmed:

It's important for me...Where I see myself working, as far as my career goals, requires that you have a degree in business management or business marketing ...Achieving high scholastic achievements has always been a goal of mine and

something I always wanted to do. After undergrad, I definitely want to pursue a graduate degree, as well. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

When asked what factors contributed to her decision to return to college, Laila asserted:

Mainly...my future and because I felt like I've always been a school person.

Growing up, it was just one of the most important things to me, as far as my future. I knew I needed to get through school, and to go to school period, in order to do what I wanted to do. So, that's mainly what made me continue on. I wanted that feeling of knowing that I graduated, too, because of family experiences. (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

Likewise, Akeelah felt an urgency to return to college after "stopping out" for two years. Her sister had already graduated. She replied, "It was more so the urgency of getting my degree and pursuing my education; and also, my sister" (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016).

Case Theme 2: Importance of Family Support

Family support is essential in the life of a college student. Laila, Bethany, and Akeelah honor their parents and family for their encouragement, provision, and reassurance. Laila's parents have a college background. Her mother was working on an associate's degree, at the time of the interview; and her father had completed all but one semester before leaving college in the past. Laila's parents encouraged her to get a college degree so that she can compete in the job market. Laila believes that getting a degree will increase her chances of finding a "good job." She stated, "They just really encouraged me because they see how the job market is, especially in [state]. It seems to

be geared more towards people with degrees – good jobs here anyway” (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016).

Bethany’s mother had gone to the University in the past but didn’t complete her degree. Actually, her mother and father met at the University. Bethany stated the following:

My mom said you should go to the University because I went there and I didn’t finish; so you can be the one who finishes. They’re very supportive. They always tell me, you know, to focus on everything in school right now; everything else outside of school will still be there. Just focus on school, focus on getting out, so we can all be done. My sister graduated from [Sister] College in 2012 and...If I would’ve stayed at the University and didn’t leave, I would’ve graduated in 2013. (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah had a slightly different story. Akeelah is a first-generation college student and her parents, although very supportive of her decision, were not able to play a substantial role in her preparation to enter college. She revealed:

My family absolutely didn’t have a role in my attending college because I am a first-generation college student. I’m the first person in my family to go to college. So my sister and I just wanted to set an example for our other four siblings. I don’t think I had any family members who went to college, knew anything about college, or how to really get enrolled into college. It was more so that I had really good teachers in high school. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah had supportive teachers in high school. These experiences demonstrate the positive and effective roles that high school teachers and counselors can play in a student's decision to attend college. She reflected on her time in high school:

They played a huge role. One of my teachers in high school gave an assignment for us to complete our FAFSA. His assignments were all about our progression into college. We had to submit three applications to get points. So, overall for us to have a good grade in his class, we had to be making progress to get into college. Another one of his assignments was for us to take the SAT or the ACT. My school also had waivers for us to take [the tests]. My school was just amazing as far as preparing us to go off to college. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Support not only comes from our immediate families, but it can come from our extended families, as well. The popular phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child," resonated when Akeelah shared that she found an ally in her cousin. She asserted:

One of my cousins, who actually was a student at [Olive Branch] College before it went under, played a huge part in my sister and me going off to school; having interest in joining a sorority; and being active on campus. He was one of my main supporters...He was such a huge influence...A huge motivator as to why I cannot wait to get my degree. But, he passed away not too long ago to cancer. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Case Theme 3: Need for Financial Aid

The ability to pay for college is a fundamental concern for college students, families, and colleges and universities. Financial aid provided by federal and state governments, as well as philanthropic organizations, is vital to the welfare of this nation; domestically and internationally. In listening to the stories of the participants, it was evident that financial aid played a major role in attending college and persisting to graduation. Navigating the complex financial aid process has been problematic for some parents and students, alike.

Laila attributed financial aid as being the “only reason” for her stopping out. She confirmed, “I’ve had three semesters worth of breaks since I’ve been in school here.” Laila has had problems with financial aid and credits her mother for intervening on her behalf in interacting with the financial aid office staff. Laila contended:

Well, that’s mainly – that’s the only reason for my breaks – only reason. It was not by choice...I don’t think I get a lot of funding from financial aid. It seems that way because they told me before coming this year that I had maxed out everything, basically. But, I didn’t know where money would come from when I was getting it added to my account...It took so much and it took my mom to get involved for me to even get the funding half the time, especially this year. So, I feel like that shouldn’t have to be the case, but it was. And so I’ve had a lot of problems with financial aid here...and it always takes my mom stepping in.

(Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

Bethany has also reached the maximum amount on some financial aid funding. Her mother is now paying out-of-pocket for most of her college expenses. Bethany expressed:

It's just so expensive; that's the only thing...And I don't know a lot of ways to get scholarships. When I first came in 2009, I think I was able to get a lot because I was just starting. I had a fresh clean financial slate. I didn't have any loans or anything...it was easier then. But now that I have been in so long and I have maxed out on loans, I really don't have a lot of options. (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah applauded the support of her parents; however, she had to be diligent in seeking and maintaining financial resources to pay educational costs. She stated her parent's position:

They have always been supportive. At the end of the day, I know I can count on them. Well, let me not say that. At the end of the day, I know I can count on them for moral support, but financially, you're on your own. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah has been persistent in securing financial aid funding such as merit-based scholarships, state need-based scholarships, and by holding elected offices in the Student Government Association. She also credits the rapport she has built with administrators at the University. She asserted:

I've been able to pretty much solidify scholarships by the positions that I've won. It was in SGA. So that played a part with financial aid. And I know, just based on my relationships with the people here, if I really need something; I know that I

can come to them. If they have it, they'll probably give it to me; but if they don't, probably not. It's just one of those things; if you don't ask, they won't offer; and if they have it, they won't tell you. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Case Theme 4: The Right Fit

Choosing the right college fit can be a critical element in persistence by fostering institutional commitment and loyalty. All of the participants expressed pride in attending the University, an HBCU.

Laila relocated from another state after graduating from high school. Her main objective was to attend a college or university in the state in which she and her parents lived. After studying several schools, she noticed that the University “just happened to be an HBCU” and decided to apply. She emphasized:

I thought that [attending an HBCU] would be interesting because I grew up in private school...My last year of middle school up through high school, was mostly whites. So, I just felt like I wasn't in touch with my own history...I felt like this would help me. I learned a lot about my history. It made me look at things a lot differently and showed me how a lot of things started in my culture versus what I thought. (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

Bethany's motivation to attend the University largely stemmed from her older sister attending a neighboring private women's HBCU, [Sister] College. Bethany exclaimed:

This is the only school I applied to. I was like, “Oh my God”, I got to go to the University. My mom went here; she met my dad here. I will be close to my sister and I was thinking that we were going to be able to hook up and bond.

(Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah had offers from several institutions but her best friend, who went to the same high school, told her about the University. After going on a campus tour of the University, she exclaimed:

It was everything that she [best friend] explained to me, but more. I think it was especially well presented to me; the Orientation Guides [OG's] were amazing. It just really gave me a good family feeling. And not to mention, some of the people that I knew in my neighborhood also worked at the University. So, just by them working there and me knowing they're good people; I just felt like I had a sense of security being there. And not only that, after I was accepted, my sister sought admission into the school and she was eventually accepted. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Case Theme 5: Enduring to the End

Resilience, perseverance, and mental fortitude were testaments to the essence of the human spirit in the young women who were interviewed for this study. Stories of disappointments, deferred dreams, and fleeting moments of self-doubt gave way to triumph, accomplishments, and enduring faith.

Laila did not start college directly out of high school in 2009. She was accepted into the University in fall 2009; but, did not start until spring 2010. Laila and her parents,

like many other families, did not know how to navigate the complex financial aid process. Laila admitted:

We didn't know exactly who to talk to or what it was we needed to find out, for the most part. Because you know my mom hadn't dealt with that in years. So, we didn't know which way to go. But, we figured it out later. (Laila, personal communications, February 8, 2016)

Laila stopped out of college three times due to inadequate financial resources. She has the support of family and is determined to complete her degree. She plans to graduate in May 2016.

A tragic fatal incident that occurred in close proximity to Bethany's campus residence hall prompted her to leave the University and transfer to a nearby public institution after her freshman year. She became concerned about her surroundings. Bethany exclaimed:

Everything got shut down and locked down. We couldn't have visitors. I didn't really feel...not saying safe, but I felt like it was a bad environment as far as being by the residence hall. They cut off the roads...put up barricades.

(Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

While Bethany was enrolled at the public institution, she experienced academic challenges in mathematics and was placed on academic supervision. She stated, "I can't do math...that was my biggest struggle" (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016).

She took a semester off and sought professional services to determine if she had a learning disorder. Bethany was diagnosed with a learning disorder but felt ambivalent about the diagnosis. She admitted:

I know I have a problem with math and maybe I have a learning disability as far as remembering...I know I can't remember formulas and certain equations...It's really hard for me to do math problems. (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Bethany returned to the University and when asked what factors contributed to her decision to return, she emphatically replied:

The teachers. I remember Dr. Nice. I remember when I had first-year seminar; she was the best, she was such a sweet lady. So, the teachers are what made me come back.

The teachers know your name. If you don't come to class, they're like "Where were you today? "You weren't in school." I like that. They hold you accountable. They will work with you. (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Bethany was able to pass the mathematics course with the help of her professor at the University. Bethany plans to graduate in May 2016. She stated:

I had Dr. Math, he's an older gentleman and he really worked with me. I let him know that I've taken math about five times; I've failed each time. Could you have some patience with me? (Bethany, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah had a completely different story as to why she was a senior and still persisting toward degree completion. She mentioned, “Since my parents had no knowledge about college, it was very difficult.” Akeelah recalled:

When I came here...there were so many challenges. That’s when the school had the lawsuit going on where they fired the tenured professors...For me, being a freshman, it was overwhelming. But what ended up happening to me is the worst possible thing that could ever happen to a student...I don’t wish it on my worst enemy. They lost all form of documentation that I was ever a student at the University. I have a twin sister and I guess, within their system, they thought that it was only one of us. They sent a huge balance to collections claiming that I owed them money; but no one could provide me any information as to how I owed the money.

So, I had to leave school to try to pay all the money back that no one could give me any information as to why I owed it. In my mind, I wanted to start over and go to another school, but I wanted to go to the University. So, I worked myself to the bone to save up all the money to pay a collection company that was harassing me. When I finally get back to the University after two years, no one could provide me with any information; any documentation as to why that happened to me. But they finally came to the realization that they made a big mistake; and they called me a ‘special case.’ They called me a ‘special case.’ (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

As Akeelah reflected on those difficult early years in her college career, she acknowledged the spectrum of emotions she felt, ranging from depression to triumph. She summed it up this way:

But, on a brighter side of things, I feel that everything happens for a reason. I don't feel the resentment that I use to feel being a student at the University. Because I've been able to join one of the biggest sororities in the world, I've been able to hold two executive board positions in SGA. I've been able to do so many things. (Akeelah, personal communications, April 5, 2016)

Akeelah overcame, what seemed to be, insurmountable challenges and persevered to keep her dream of becoming a college graduate alive. She plans to graduate in May 2016.

Qualitative Data Response to Research Questions 12-13

Findings

RQ12: Based on the participants' responses to items on the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire, what factors appear to be contributing to persistence to graduation past six years?

An analysis of the responses suggested that family support and expectations may be a factor contributing to persistence toward a college degree past six years. Responses to Survey Questions 18-21 showed 100% of participants selected either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, indicating a positive perception of family support. Furthermore, an analysis of the participants' responses suggested that faculty-student relationship may be a contributing factor to persistence to graduation within six years. Responses to Survey Questions 27

showed that 100% of participants favorably selected either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, implying a positive perception of the relationship with faculty. Institutional factors such as technology may also contribute to persistence to graduation past six years. Responses to Survey Question 34 showed that 100% of participants had a positive perception of campus Internet and wireless services.

RQ13: Based on the follow-up interviews to the Graduation: Survey of

Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire, what case themes emerged from the narrative reflections, perspectives, and real-life experiences shared with the researcher by the purposefully selected participants who were still persisting toward graduation after six years?

The case themes that emerged from the interviews with the three young women who were still persisting toward degree completion were: (a) Ensuring the Future, (b) Importance of Family Support, (c) Need for Financial Aid, (d) The Right Fit, and (e) Enduring to the End.

Summary

This chapter presented the quantitative and qualitative analysis for the data collected for this research study. Data for the quantitative inquiry were collected from the student information system for students in the Fall 2008 Cohort who graduated within six years. A total of 346 students met the criteria and 344 were included in the population. Stratified sampling was used to separate the group by gender and by years to graduate. Systematic sampling was utilized to select 50% of the Year 4 and Year 5

female graduates. The entire population was used for Year 6 females and all males who graduated in Year 4, 5, and 6. The total size of sample was 211.

The study revealed significant relationships between persistence to graduation within six years and the variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. Additionally, the study indicated that *Final GPA* was significantly related to the variables of *Persistence to Graduation within Six Years*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*.

The data for the qualitative analysis were collected from a group of purposefully selected students who were still persisting toward an undergraduate degree past six years in spring 2016. The data were collected from four participants who completed the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire. Follow-up interviews were conducted with three participants who either completed the survey and/or met the criteria of the study.

A case study research approach was used to explore the real-life experiences of the participants. The analysis of the survey suggested that external factors such as (a) family support, (b) faculty-student relationship, and (c) technology may contribute to persistence to graduation past six years. The case themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews and findings from the survey were: (a) Ensuring the Future, (b) Importance of Family Support, (c) Need for Financial Aid, (d) The Right Fit, and (e) Enduring to the End. The responses from the survey on the impact of financial aid on persistence and the case theme—Need for Financial Aid—support the statistically significant relationship

between persistence to graduation within six years and the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded in the quantitative part of the study.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter highlights the findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the mixed methods research study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between selected variables and persistence to graduation within six years and final grade point average. Moreover, a study was conducted to understand the essence and meaning of the real-life experiences of participants who were still persisting toward degree completion past six years. A correlational research approach was used to conduct the quantitative inquiry and a case study research approach was utilized in the qualitative inquiry.

Findings

Quantitative

The research questions have been restated and the quantitative data analysis support the following findings:

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly positively related to the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. The significance was .027, with a significance level of 0.05.

The results revealed as the total number of financial aid

occurrences increased, the number of years to graduate increased.

Similarly, as the total number of financial aid occurrences decreased, the number of years to graduate decreased.

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and high school GPA?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to high school GPA. The significance was .018, with a significance level of 0.05. The results revealed that as the high school GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased. Likewise, as the high school GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased.

RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and ACT Composite scores?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was not significantly related to ACT Composite scores. The significance is .204, higher than the 0.05 level of significance.

RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and SAT Combined scores?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to SAT Combined scores. The significance was .035, with a significance level of 0.05. The results revealed that as SAT Combined scores increased, the number of years to graduate

decreased. Similarly, as SAT Combined scores decreased, the number of years to graduate increased.

RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year first-semester GPA?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to first-year first-semester GPA. The significance was .001, with a significance level of 0.01. The results disclosed that as the first-year first-semester GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased. Likewise, as the first-year first-semester GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased.

RQ6: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and the first-year cumulative GPA?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to the first-year cumulative GPA. The significance was .000, with a significance level of 0.01. The results strongly revealed that as the first-year cumulative GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased; and, as the first-year cumulative GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased.

RQ7: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and parent or independent student adjusted gross income as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was not significantly related to parent or independent student adjusted gross income. The significance was .913, higher than the significance level of 0.05.

RQ8: Is there a significant relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to percent of time living on campus after earning 58 credit hours. The significance was .000, with a significance level of 0.01. The results revealed that living on campus and the number of years to graduate were inversely related. Moreover, as the number of semesters living on campus increased, the number of years to graduate decreased.
- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly positively related to living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours. The significance was .027, with a significance level of 0.05. The results revealed that the higher the on- or off-campus score was, the higher the number of years to graduate. Conversely, the lower the on- or off-campus score was, the lower the number of years to graduate. The correlations further indicated that living on campus for any period of time after 58 credit hours increased the chance of graduating within six years.

RQ9: Is there a significant relationship between final GPA and the number of years to graduate, total occurrences of financial aid awarded, high school GPA, ACT Composite score, SAT Combined score, first-year first-semester GPA, first-year cumulative GPA, adjusted gross income, and on-campus or off-campus housing?

- Persistence to graduation within six years was found to be significantly negatively related to the final GPA. The significance was .000, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as the final GPA increased, the number of years to graduate decreased. Likewise, as the final GPA decreased, the number of years to graduate increased.
- Final GPA was not significantly related to the total number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. The significance was .316, which is higher than the 0.05 level of significance.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to high school GPA. The significance was .000, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as the high school GPA increased, the final GPA increased. Similarly, as the high school GPA decreased, the final GPA decreased.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to ACT Composite scores. The significance was .006, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as ACT Composite scores increased, the final GPA increased, as well.

- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to SAT Combined scores. The significance was .000, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as SAT Combined scores decreased, the final GPA decreased.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to the first-year first-semester GPA. The significance was .000, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as the final GPA increased, the first-year first-semester GPA increased, accordingly.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to the first-year cumulative GPA. The significance was .000, with a significance level of .001. The results revealed that as the final GPA decreased, the first-year cumulative GPA decreased. Conversely, as the final GPA increased, the first-year cumulative GPA increased.
- Final GPA was not significantly related to the adjusted gross income. The significance was .533; however, the two variables leaned in opposite directions.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly positively related to living on campus after earning 58 credit hours. The significance was .002, with a significance level of 0.01. The results revealed that as the percent of time living on campus increased, the final GPA increased.
- Final GPA was found to be significantly negatively related to living on campus or off campus after earning 58 credit hours. The significance

was .034, with a significance level of 0.05. The results revealed that the higher the on- or off-campus score (On = 1, Off = 2), the lower the final GPA. Likewise, the lower the on- or off-campus score, the higher the final GPA.

RQ10: Is there a significant difference in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within four years than the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded to students who graduated within five or six years?

- There were no significant differences in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded among the groups of Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6 graduates. The significance was .083, with a significance level of 0.05.

RQ11: Is there a significant difference in the final GPA and persistence to graduation in Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6?

- The results revealed that there were significant differences in the final GPA between Year 4 and Year 5, with a significance of .000; and between Year 4 and Year 6, with a significance of .000. There were no significant differences between Year 5 and Year 6, indicated by a significance of .871.

Qualitative

The research questions have been restated and the qualitative data analysis support the following findings:

RQ12: Based on the participants' responses to items on the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence (GSOUP) questionnaire, what factors appear to be contributing to persistence to graduation past six years?

- An analysis of the participants' responses to the GSOUP questionnaire suggested that family support may be a contributing factor to persistence to graduation past six years.
- An analysis of the participants' responses to the GSOUP questionnaire suggested that a positive perception of the faculty-student relationship may be a contributing factor to persistence to graduation past six years.
- An analysis of the participants' responses to the GSOUP questionnaire suggested that a favorable perception of institutional factors such as technology may contribute to persistence to graduation past six years.

RQ13: Based on the follow-up interviews to the Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence questionnaire, what case themes emerged from the narrative reflections, perspectives, and real-life experiences shared with the researcher by the purposefully selected participants who were still persisting toward graduation after six years?

- The case themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the participants who were still persisting toward degree completion were: (a) Ensuring the Future, (b) Importance of Family Support, (c)

Need for Financial Aid, (d) The Right Fit, and (e) Enduring to the End.

The Great Recession of 2008

The case study findings from the participants' responses on the questionnaire and from the interviews suggested that financial aid played a significant role in their life experiences while persisting toward a college degree. The participants in the case study, as well as the Fall 2008 Cohort, entered college as a freshman in the 2008-2009 or the 2009-2010 academic year. During that period, the United States' economy suffered the worst setback since the Great Depression that lasted from December 2007 to June 2009 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). The 2008 recession, also referred to as the Great Recession, began with the "bursting of the housing bubble" as a result of banks and private financial institutions accumulating large portfolios of mortgage-backed securities. The financial crisis in the housing market had a domino effect that spread to Wall Street, investment companies, the automobile industry, multinational insurance companies, local banks, and to other countries. The U.S. labor market was hit hard and millions of jobs were lost. Consequently, homeowners lost their homes, families lost health insurance, the unemployment rate rose, earnings dropped, and poverty rose.

The Economic Policy Institute (2016) reported that as a result of the Great Recession, the median household income for African Americans fell 10.1% compared to 5.4% for white households from 2007-2010. Perhaps, the most staggering figures were that the annual employment rate for African Americans was 15.9% in 2010 and 2011, compared to 8.0% for whites; the median net worth was \$4,900 for African Americans in

2010, compared to \$97,000 for whites (Economic Policy Institute, 2016). Although, the United States showed signs of recovery at the end of the recession in 2009, African Americans are still feeling the aftermath. The impact of the financial crisis on the families of the participants in the findings of this case study is a plausible explanation as to why financial resources were a significant factor in persisting toward degree completion past six years. In an interview, a participant shared that one of her parents lost a job during this same period.

The Parent PLUS Loan Crisis of 2012

The end of the Great Recession in 2009 gave way to the Parent PLUS Loan crisis that sent shockwaves through the higher education community, especially HBCUs. In October 2011, the U.S. Department of Education changed the eligibility requirements by redefining the meaning of “adverse credit history” without prior notification to institutions, parents, or students. Under the new “adverse credit history” regulations, effective in the 2012-2013 school year, delinquencies older than 90 days were considered in determining creditworthiness for the Parent PLUS loans (Hayes, 2013). For example, parents that had accounts in collections or written off within the past five years were not approved for a loan.

In June 2013, the Office of Postsecondary Education of the Department of Education held a public hearing at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, attended by HBCU presidents and senior officers and students. In addressing the impact of the new Parent PLUS Loan regulations on HBCUs in the 2012-2013 academic year, Dr. Carlton E. Brown, then President of Clark Atlanta University, asserted the following:

But last year the drastic decision to change the credit regulations controlling the Parent PLUS loan without effective evaluation of its impact nationally, and specifically on HBCUs, and without prior communication and input, has resulted in a tornadic effect through the denials of 400,000 Parent PLUS applications, 28,000 of those for students at HBCUs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 40)

According to the UNCF (2011), the Parent PLUS Loan approval rate dropped from 48% in the 2011-2012 academic year to 27% in 2012-2013, costing HBCUs \$155 million in Parent PLUS Loan revenue. The participants in this case study could have also been affected by the Parent PLUS Loan crisis as well as the Great Recession of 2008.

Findings from the GSOU questionnaire indicated that 100% of respondents perceived that financial resources played a role in not completing their degree within six years and 75% felt that their parents or family could not contribute to their college education. The findings from the follow-up interviews reverberated the same positions.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was signed into law in 2002 under the administration of President George W. Bush. NCLB set high expectations based on accountability and assessment. The Act required that states develop and implement a single statewide accountability system for all public schools so that all students would meet or exceed State standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years and test students in grades 3 through 8 (U. S. Department of Education, 2016b). Moreover, each

state had to define “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and establish criteria to measure the achievements that each school made on academic assessments each year. If a school did not make AYP in two years, it would be identified for school improvement.

Additionally, if schools did not make AYP in years three through five, the results could lead to the state taking over the schools and replacing the principals and staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Needless to say, making AYP was high stake; especially since it was tied to federal funding and the livelihoods of school administrators. As a result, NCLB has been criticized for pressuring teachers to produce high and unrealistic test results, contributing to a wave of test-cheating scandals around the country.

The participants in this study were in P-12 under the NCLB school reform and could have been negatively impacted by the unscrupulous practices in some school districts. Verdaillia Turner (2013, cited in Resnikoff, 2013), president of the Georgia Federation of Teachers emphasized:

We don’t condone cheating, but when you have high-stakes testing, which are one-shot deals that don’t tell you whether a child is going to fail or succeed, the whole setup in terms of No Child Left Behind was unfair to children, unfair to educators. (MSNBC Cable News)

In Survey Question #38, the participants were asked to rate the level of agreement or disagreement that academic performance in college played a role in not completing their degrees within six years. Fifty percent responded that academic performance did play a role in not graduating in six years, while the other half did not think it was a factor.

In an interview, a participant shared with the researcher that she had challenges in posting a passing score in mathematics in college. She had to repeat the course a few times before she successfully passed it. Perhaps, if the secondary schools had been more intentional about preparing her to do college-level course work, the participant could have saved money, time, and frustration after entering college.

Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The findings from the GSOUP questionnaire and participants' interviews in the qualitative inquiry on the role of financial aid support the quantitative findings on the relationship between the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded and persistence to graduation. In the quantitative analysis, persistence to graduation within six years was significantly positively related to the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded. As the number of financial aid occurrences decreased, the number of years to graduate decreased accordingly. Likewise, an increase in the number of financial aid occurrences resulted in an increase in years to graduate. Moreover, the students who demonstrated the greatest amount of need customarily received more financial aid awards; thereby, increasing the total number of occurrences.

The findings from Research Question 1 coincide with the participants' responses to Survey Questions 22-25 and 37 pertaining to the role of financial aid on persistence to graduation.

- Survey Question #22 – 75% Unfavorable Perception
 - I receive adequate financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and/or loans to pay for college expenses.

- Survey Question #23 – 75% Unfavorable Perception
 - My parents/family **cannot** contribute to my college education.
- Survey Question #24 – 50% Unfavorable Perception
 - Financial aid was a key factor in my decision to attend college.
- Survey Question #25 – 100% Unfavorable Perception
 - I **am not** concerned about paying for my college expenses.
- Survey Question #37 – 100% Unfavorable Perception
 - Financial resources played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.

The interviews yielded commonalities surrounding the influence that financial aid had on the real-life college experiences of the three interview participants. In the transcribed responses, the participants expressed concern about the ability to pay for college expenses and the need for financial aid resources; a case theme that further supported the quantitative findings in this mixed methods research study. The data triangulation was achieved through the syntheses of correlational research and the findings from the case study research.

Conclusions

According to the 2015 NCES Report, approximately 59% of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution in fall 2007 completed the degree within six years. Based on the examination of selected variables in this study, various factors were significantly related to persistence to graduation within six years.

Furthermore, a qualitative inquiry suggested that other external factors may also impact

persistence. The quantitative data analysis indicated that persistence to graduation within six years was significantly related to the variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. The study showed that *ACT Composite Score* and *Adjusted Gross Income* were not significantly related to persistence.

Additionally, the quantitative data analysis revealed that *Final GPA* was significantly related to the variables of *Persistence to Graduation within Six Years*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. The study showed that *Financial Aid Awarded* and *Adjusted Gross Income* were not significantly related to *Final GPA*.

There were no significant differences in the number of occurrences of financial aid awarded among the Year 4, Year 5, or Year 6 graduates. The quantitative data revealed that *Final GPA* was significantly different between Year 4 and Year 5; and between Year 4 and Year 6. There were no significant differences between Year 5 and Year 6.

The synthesis of findings from the quantitative and qualitative data analyzes corroborated the relationship between financial aid and persistence to graduation. Responses from the GSOUP questionnaire and the in-depth interviews suggested that external non-academic factors such as family support, faculty-student relationships, peer relations, engagement, and technology may also contribute to persistence toward degree completion.

Implications

This mixed methods study was conducted to contribute to the body of research literature on persistence in higher education to strategically and intentionally promote change in policies of education lawmakers and practices of P-12 and postsecondary educational leaders, and to expand the scope of future research in persistence to degree attainment. The implications for this study are widespread. The findings revealed that certain critical variables are significantly related to persistence to graduation within six years. The Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 requires that postsecondary institutions report the percentage of students who complete their program within six years for students pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Implications for Policy

The ability to pay for college is a growing concern. Financial aid has not kept pace with the rising cost of attendance at colleges and universities. President Obama has made some strides in addressing federal student aid, such as raising the maximum Pell Grant and increasing investments in Historically Black Colleges and Universities; however, it is still becoming more difficult for individuals to go to college and stay in college.

Responses from the survey and the interviews suggested that financial aid can promote or impede persistence to graduation. As advocates, policy makers can make the case to ensure every individual that desires to go to college is given the opportunity.

Implications for Practice

Colleges and universities face similar challenges of recruiting, admitting, and graduating students. The findings in this study suggest that since persistence is significantly related to *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *Final GPA*; postsecondary institutions could benefit from establishing more learning assistance programs, especially institutions that serve academically unprepared and underrepresented populations. Early identification along with early intensive and continuous intervention increases the chances for student success (Seidman, 2012).

This research study can be used by college and university leaders to determine the factors at their respective institutions that impact persistence to graduation within six years. Graduation rates affect institutional selectivity, reputation, and revenue. On a more fundamental level, completing a college degree increases an individual's earning potentials, impacts the well-being of their families, and increases the chances of health and happiness.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers interested in the findings and implications of this study should consider expanding the population to include more cohorts, institutional types, ethnicities, and geographical regions for better comparisons. More research is needed on the impact of financial aid on persistence in Minority Serving Institutions. Furthermore, researchers should consider a study to determine the influence that external factors, such as the ones mentioned in this study, have on persistence with a larger sample size to ensure more variations in the findings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher would make the following recommendations to policy makers, P-12 educational leaders, high school counselors, postsecondary executive administrators, enrollment management administrators, financial aid administrators, academic deans, chairpersons, faculty, and future researchers.

Recommendations to Policy Makers

It is the recommendation of the researcher that Federal, State, and Local Policy Makers consider the following:

- Review and revise the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application and process. Parents and students continue to experience difficulty in successfully navigating the FAFSA process which, in turn, causes delay in getting the needed financial assistance to pay for college expenses. Streamlining the process would reduce the number of errors and corrections; thereby, reducing the delay in receiving student aid.
- Increase the maximum Pell Grant amount to students to cover more college expenses in private institutions. The tuition costs in private institutions are considerably higher than in public institutions. As a result, students in private institutions, especially HBCUs, have to rely more on loans that have to be repaid. A large percentage of the students in most HBCUs are already considered economically disadvantaged and accumulating huge amounts of debt while in college can set them back even further.

Recommendations to P-12 Educational Leaders

The researcher makes the following recommendations to P-12 Educational Leaders in district schools and in Local Educational Agencies:

- Design rigorous high school curriculums to ensure that all students have the opportunity to take at least four years of English; three years of mathematics, including algebra, geometry, and algebra II; three years of science, including biology, chemistry, and physics; three years of social studies; foreign languages; art and/or music. High school academic preparation is significantly positively related to student persistence to graduation in college. More challenging courses for all students will increase their chances of success in postsecondary education.
- Form partnerships with colleges and universities to create pathways from high school to college. There appears to be a “disconnect” between what students learn in high school and what is expected of them when they start college. This leads to the need for more developmental courses for which the students receive “zero” credit hours and do not count toward degree requirements. Taking developmental courses increases their time to graduate and increases the cost of their college education. By creating pathways between high school and college, it will allow the students to become more familiar with what it will take to increase the likelihood of their success while in college and life after college.

- Sponsor financial aid workshops for parents and high school students and invite financial aid administrators from local colleges to discuss how to successfully navigate the financial aid process. The FAFSA application process is complex and often parents do not have the experience or the information needed to make a smooth transition from high school to college. The individual institutions also have financial aid rules and guidelines that the parents and college applicants need to be aware of.

Recommendations to High School Counselors

It is the recommendation of the researcher that High School Counselors consider the following to promote the success of high school students in postsecondary education:

- Encourage all students to obtain a postsecondary education. A formal education beyond high school has become more important now than ever. The labor market is demanding a more-educated and highly-skilled work force. High school students need to know the benefits of a postsecondary education and what to expect in this global economy.
- Collaborate with colleges and universities in visiting high schools regularly to reinforce the importance of earning a college degree. Colleges and universities, especially locally, form a sense of community when they visit high schools regularly to speak with students to let them know what their possibilities can be with a college degree.
- Arrange visits to college campuses to expose high school students to college life. College tours can help to reinforce encouragement from high school

counselors and others and also serve as a mental image of what college life can be as a student.

Recommendations to Postsecondary Executive Administrators

The researcher makes the following recommendations for Postsecondary Executive Administrators:

- Increase the capacity for more on-campus housing to accommodate students in their third and fourth years of college. The findings in this study have shown a significantly positive relationship between persistence to graduation within six years and living on campus. Students have a better chance of getting involved and staying involved, both academically and socially, when they live in campus residence halls. Some colleges and universities require that freshmen and sophomores live on campus; however, living on campus after the second year increases the students' chances of completing their degrees.
- Increase institutional scholarship funds. The ability to pay is an increasing concern, especially for minorities and economically disadvantaged students. This study showed that economic crises can wreak havoc on families and jeopardize the opportunity to go to or stay in college. More institutional scholarship funding is necessary to promote access to college and to help students persist to graduation, while reducing their reliance on loans that have to be repaid.

Recommendations to Enrollment Management Administrators

It is the recommendation of the researcher that Enrollment Management Administrators consider the following:

- Implement or expand intrusive learning assistance programs that integrate with academic affairs and student affairs to gain a holistic understanding of students' needs. According to Arendale (2010, p. 1), learning assistance in colleges and universities for undergraduates may take the form of:
 - Tutorial programs (on-line and in person)
 - Peer study groups
 - Study strategy workshops
 - Computer-based learning
 - Learning assistance centers
 - Remedial education
 - Developmental education
- Form partnerships with local middle and high schools to create pathways from high school to college. Plan regular visits to middle and high schools and be visible in the communities where they live to create a sense of community. Build a culture of expectation so they will realize that postsecondary education is attainable.
- Form partnerships with local corporations and encourage them to become corporate sponsors by sponsoring student internships, establishing work study programs, and providing opportunities for civic engagement. These initiatives

will give students the opportunity to assimilate into a corporate work environment and further develop their personal and social skills.

Recommendations to Financial Aid Administrators

The researcher makes the following recommendations for Financial Aid Administrators to assist families and students in the financial aid process:

- Implement strategies to promote awareness of financial aid rules, regulations, and guidelines. Completing the FAFSA application and navigating the financial aid system is complicated. Parents and students find it difficult to navigate the necessary paths to reach the enrollment finish line. Visit high schools and malls in the neighborhoods where the students live to promote awareness of the financial assistance that is available to them.
- Implement or enhance communication plan to assist students in finding scholarships. Tuition has been rising beyond the rate of inflation in public colleges and universities for more than a decade (O'Shaughnessy, 2012). Normally, private college expenses are higher than public colleges. Students who attend private colleges, such as the site of this study, benefit greatly from scholarship funds to aid in paying for educational costs. Numerous external scholarships are available; however, students may not know how to access them. Timely and relevant information from the financial aid office could improve the students' chances of getting the necessary funds to help them stay in school. In an interview for this study, a participant exclaimed, "I don't know a lot of ways to get scholarships" (Bethany, personal communications,

April 5, 2016). A study by Cabrera et al. (2002) found that scholarships had the greatest impact on retention.

Recommendations to Academic Deans, Chairpersons, and Faculty

It is the recommendation of the researcher that Academic Deans, Chairpersons, and Faculty consider the following:

- Implement or participate in a student early alert system to promote student success. The first year of college for first-time students is critical, especially the first semester. Findings in this study have shown that the first-year first-semester GPA and the first-year cumulative GPA are significantly related to persistence. Alerts early in the first semester can signal the student, faculty, student affairs, and academic support to start an intervention process.
- Frequently engage students in educationally purposeful activities outside of the classroom. These activities help to build student-faculty relationships and encourage camaraderie among colleagues. Educationally purposeful activities also foster student involvement and engagement, and academic and social integration into college life which, in turn, increase the likelihood of persistence to degree completion (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).
- Ensure that new faculty members, especially adjunct faculty, know the rules of engagement as it relates to attendance checking, enrollment status, and posting of grades. The onboarding of new adjunct faculty at the beginning of a semester can sometimes be rushed and they do not receive adequate information on policies and practices of the institution in a timely manner.

Some colleges and universities have strict rules about attendance due to financial aid disbursement guidelines. If students' attendance is not marked in a certain period of time, it can adversely affect their student refunds, if one is warranted. Additionally, course registrations can be affected, resulting in cancellation of classes. Experiences of this type affects institutional commitment by causing student dissatisfaction with the institutional climate and can lead to early departure from college (Bean, 1980).

Recommendations for Future Researchers

The researcher suggests that future researchers consider the following recommendations and continue to explore persistence in postsecondary education by investigating various factors that promote and impede student success in degree attainment:

- Replicate study at multiple HBCUs and non-HBCUs and include the effects of socio-psychological factors such as student motivation, self-efficacy, and peer influences. Persistence is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by myriad variables, both quantifiable and unquantifiable.
- Replicate institutional study as a longitudinal study and follow cohort from Year 1 to Year 6. The researcher recommends administering a survey in the freshman year to establish the students' intent to persist for future comparisons to actual degree completion. All students do not begin college with the intentions of getting a degree at the same institution and some students do not intend to get a degree at all. Knowing the intentions of a

student will allow the institution to better assist them in reaching their academic goals, no matter what they are.

- Expand research to include longitudinal, multi-institutional studies by control (public, private nonprofit, private for-profit), level (four-year, two-year, less-than-two-year), and size. College aspirants and their families choose different types and sizes of colleges and universities to attend and often do not know what combination of personal and institutional characteristics promote student success to degree attainment and a positive college experience.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between selected variables and persistence to graduation within six years and the final grade point average of first-time full-time college freshmen in the Fall 2008 Cohort at a private HBCU. Moreover, reflections, perceptions, and real-life experiences of purposefully selected participants who did not graduate within six years were explored to grasp an in-depth understanding to describe and analyze the phenomenon of persistence to graduation more holistically. The study revealed significant relationships between persistence to graduation within six years and the variables of *Financial Aid Awarded*, *High School GPA*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*. Additionally, the study indicated that *Final GPA* was significantly related to the variables of *Persistence to Graduation within Six Years*, *High School GPA*, *ACT Composite Score*, *SAT Combined Score*, *First-Year First-Semester GPA*, *First-Year Cumulative GPA*, and *On-Campus or Off-Campus Housing*.

Responses from the GSOUUP questionnaire suggested that family support, faculty-student relationships, and technology may contribute to persistence to graduation past six years. The case themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews were: (a) Ensuring the Future, (b) Importance of Family Support, (c) Need for Financial Aid, (d) The Right Fit, and (e) Enduring to the End.

The triangulation of the data was supported by synthesizing the findings from the quantitative and qualitative inquiries on the influence of financial aid on persistence to degree completion. Recommendations were made to policy makers, P-12 educational leaders, high school counselors, postsecondary executive administrators, enrollment management administrators, financial aid administrators, academic deans, chairpersons, and faculty, and future researchers.

APPENDIX A

Graduation: Survey of Undergraduate Persistence

Questionnaire

1. What year did you enroll at the University as a freshman?

2. Did you leave the University for a period of time since your freshman year?

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. If yes, please indicate reason(s) for leaving.

4. Where do you live?

☐ On-Campus Residence Hall

☐ Off Campus with Family

☐ Off Campus **Not** With Family

5. Do you work on campus?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. How many hours do you work off campus each week?

☐ I do not work off campus

☐ 1 – 10 hours

☐ 11 – 20 hours

☐ 21 – 30 hours

☐ 31 or more

7. My current college GPA is:

☐ 3.50 – 4.00

☐ 3.00 – 3.49

☐ 2.50 – 2.99

☐ 2.00 – 2.49

☐ Below 2.00

The following questions will give you an opportunity to tell us more about your prior college academic experiences.

8. I took the following English courses in high school. Check all that apply.

☐ American Literature

☐ Composition

☐ English Literature

☐ World Literature

9. I took the following Mathematics courses in high school. Check all that apply.

☐ Algebra I

☐ Algebra II

☐ Pre-Calculus

☐ Geometry

☐ Calculus

☐ Trigonometry

10. I took the following Social Studies courses in high school. Check all that apply

☐ Geography

☐ Civics

☐ U.S. History

- ☐ U.S. Government
- ☐ World History
- ☐ World Cultures

11. I took the following Laboratory Science courses in high school. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Biology
- ☐ Chemistry
- ☐ Earth Science
- ☐ Physics

12. I took the following Visual and Performing Arts courses in high school. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Art
- ☐ Dance
- ☐ Drama
- ☐ Music
- ☐ I did not take Visual and Performing Arts courses in high school.

13. I took Foreign Language in high school for:

- ☐ One Year
- ☐ Two Years
- ☐ Three Years
- ☐ Four Years
- ☐ I did not take a Foreign Language in high school.

14. My high school GPA was:

- ☐ 3.50 – 4.00
- ☐ 3.00 – 3.49
- ☐ 2.50 – 2.99

☐ 2.00 – 2.49

☐ Below 2.00

15. I took the ACT test.

☐ Yes

☐ No

16. I took the SAT test.

☐ Yes

☐ No

17. I changed my major at least one time

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please read the statements below and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Tell us about the support from your parents/family while attending college.

18. My parents/family encouraged me to go to college.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

19. My parents/family expects me to earn a college degree.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

20. The support of my parents/family is important to me in attaining my educational goals.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

21. I can talk to my parents/family about my career goals.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

Next, we would like to know about your financial support while in college.

22. I receive adequate financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and loans to pay for college expenses.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

23. My parents/family **cannot** contribute to my college education.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

24. Financial aid was a key factor in my decision to attend college.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

25. I **am not** concerned about paying for my college expenses.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Next, we would like to know more about your college experiences as it relates to your instructors, academic advisors, peer relationships, academic support services, and campus/community involvement.

26. I am satisfied with the content of the courses in my major program of study.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

27. I feel comfortable talking to one or more of my instructors about course requirements and classroom activities.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
28. I **do not** feel comfortable initiating contact with one or more of my instructors outside of the classroom.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
29. My academic advisor is interested in my educational and career goals.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
30. I meet with my academic advisor at least one time each semester.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree

31. I can talk to my friends about my college experiences.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
32. I **do not** have a college student friend who I can talk to about my educational plans.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
33. Tutoring services are available when I need assistance.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
34. Campus Internet and wireless access are available to meet my academic needs.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
35. I **am not** interested in being a part of a campus club or organization.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree

- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

36. Participating in campus and community activities is an important part of my college educational experience.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Please reflect on potential factors that may have contributed to you not completing your degree within six years and rate the following three statements.

37. Financial resources played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

38. Academic performance played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

39. Family, career, or personal obligations played a role in not completing my undergraduate degree within six years.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Strongly Agree
40. What is your gender?
- ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
41. What is your race/ethnicity?
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
 - ☐ Asian
 - ☐ Black or African American
 - ☐ Hispanic
 - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - ☐ White
 - ☐ Two or More Races
42. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your mother?
- ☐ Junior High/Middle School or Less
 - ☐ Some High School
 - ☐ High School Graduate
 - ☐ Some College
 - ☐ Associate Degree
 - ☐ Bachelor Degree

☐ Advanced Degree (Masters, Ph.D., M.D.)

☐ Unknown

43. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your father?

☐ Junior High/Middle School or Less

☐ Some High School

☐ High School Graduate

☐ Some College

☐ Associate Degree

☐ Bachelor Degree

☐ Advanced Degree (Masters, Ph.D., M.D.)

☐ Unknown

44. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by either of your grandparents?

☐ Junior High/Middle School or Less

☐ Some High School

☐ High School Graduate

☐ Some College

☐ Associate Degree

☐ Bachelor Degree

☐ Advanced Degree (Masters, Ph.D., M.D.)

☐ Unknown

APPENDIX B

Participant Interview Protocol

- IQ1:** Why is it important for you to earn a college degree?
- IQ2:** Why did you decide to attend this university, a Historically Black College or University (HBCU)?
- IQ3:** What role did your parents/family play in your decision to attend college?
- IQ4:** What role does your parents/family play as you continue to persist to graduation?
- IQ5:** How prepared were you to do college-level course work prior to your first year of college?
- IQ6:** How has financial aid impacted your college experiences here at the University?
- IQ7:** What types of financial aid do you currently receive? Is the amount adequate?
- IQ8:** Did you leave college for a period of time? If “*Yes*,” then:
- A. What factors contributed to your decision to leave or stopout of college?
 - B. What factors contributed to your decision to return to college?
- IQ9:** What do you feel the University could do or could have done better to assist you in achieving your educational goals?

APPENDIX C

Letter to Participants

Title of Study: Financial Aid and Other Selected Variables Related to the Retention of First-Time, Full-Time College Freshmen and Their Persistence to Graduation within Six Years at a Private HBCU

You are invited to be in a research study to examine variables that may affect students completing an undergraduate degree within six years. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently working toward an undergraduate degree at least six years after you enrolled as a freshman. I believe your college experiences can provide invaluable information and insights into the factors that impact the students who do not graduate within six years. I ask that you read this letter and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: **Mary E. Anderson** (Doctoral Candidate at **Clark Atlanta University**)

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that financial aid awards and other selected variables have on undergraduate students completing a degree within six years.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Complete a short survey
- Follow-up interview

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There are no known risks to the potential participants or subjects in this research study.

The benefits to participation are: An in depth understanding of the variables that influence undergraduate students' persistence to graduation within six years. Moreover, the study will examine the perceptions of students who are still matriculating at the University past six years to gain insight into the factors that may present obstacles to

degree completion. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge in addressing the unique issues that Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions face in college retention and student persistence that could lead to action in breaking down barriers to academic success and degree attainment.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records (including tape recorders and/or videotapes) will be kept in a locked file and only the researcher (Mary E. Anderson) and dissertation chair (Dr. Trevor Turner) will have access to the records. The data will be erased and destroyed within three years after completion of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or Clark Atlanta University. Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. At any time during this research study, you are free to withdraw from the study without affecting the relationships previously identified. You may withdraw from the study by contacting the researcher and your data will be kept in a locked file and erased and destroyed as indicated in the previous section.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Mary E. Anderson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact the researcher at: (404) 379-9051 or mary.anderson@students.cau.edu or Dr. Trevor Turner at (404) 880-8980 or tturner@cau.edu.

If you have any questions now, or later, related to the integrity of the research, (the rights of research subjects or research-related injuries, where applicable), you are encouraged to contact Dr. Paul I. Musey, (404) 880-6829, at Clark Atlanta University.

Statement of Consent

By beginning the survey, you acknowledge that you have read the information and consent to participate in this research study, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

Respectfully,

Mary E. Anderson
Doctoral Candidate

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